THE TRUFFLERS

By SAMUEL MERWIN

Helmi Hellerstedt

Helmi Lillian Kellerstedt

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THE TRUFFLERS

"Pete uses the word 'truffler' to mean a young woman who turns from duty to the pursuit of enjoyment"

THE TRUFFLERS

A STORY

By

SAMUEL MERWIN

Author of Anthony the Absolute, The Charmed Life of Miss Austin,
The Honey Bee, etc.

Illustrations by Frank Snapp

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CHAPTER I

THE GIRL IN THE PLAID COAT

PETER ERICSON MANN leaned back in his chair and let his hands fall listlessly from the typewriter to his lap.

He raised them again and laboriously pecked out a few words.

It was no use.

He got up, walked to one of the front windows of the dingy old studio and peered gloomily out at the bare trees and brown grass patches of Washington Square.

Peter was a playwright of three early (and partial) successes, and two more recent failures. He was thirty-three years old; and a typical New Yorker, born in Iowa. He dressed conspicuously well, making it a principle when in funds to stock

up against lean seasons to come. He worried a good deal and kept his savings of nearly six thousand dollars (to the existence of which sum he never by any chance alluded) in five different savings banks. He wore large horn-rimmed eyeglasses (not spectacles) with a heavy black ribbon attached, and took his Art almost as seriously as himself. You know him publicly as Eric Mann.

For six months Peter had been writing words where ideas were imperatively demanded. Lately he had torn up the last of these words. He had waited in vain for the divine uprush; there had come no tingle of delighted nerves, no humming vitality, no punch. And as for his big scene, in Act III, it was a morass of sodden, tangled, dramatic concepts.

His theme this year was the modern bachelor girl; but to save his life he couldn't present her convincingly as a character in a play—perhaps because these advanced, outspoken young women irritated him too deeply to permit of close observation. Really, they frightened him. He believed in marriage, the old-fashioned woman, the home.

It had reached the point, a month back, where he could no longer even react to stimulants. He had revived an old affair with a pretty manicure girl

without stirring so much as a flutter of excitement within himself. This was Maria Tonifetti, of the sanitary barber shop of Marius in the basement of the Parisian Restaurant. He had tried getting drunk; which made him ill and induced new depths of melancholy.

No one ever saw his name any more. No one, he felt certain, ever would see it. He could look back now on the few years of his success in a spirit of awful calm. He felt that he had had genius. But the genius had burned out. All that remained to him was to live for a year or two (or three) watching that total of nearly six thousand dollars shrink—shrink—and then the end of everything. Well, he would not be the first. . . .

One faint faded joy had lately been left to Peter, one sorry reminder of the days when the magical words, the strangely hypnotic words, "Eric Mann," had spoken, sung, shouted from half the bill-boards in town. Over beyond Sixth Avenue, hardly five minutes' walk through the odd tangle of wandering streets, the tenements and ancient landmarks and subway excavations and little triangular breathing places that make up the Greenwich Village of to-day, there had lingered one faded, torn twenty-four-sheet poster, advertising "The Buzzard, by Eric Mann."

When he was bluest lately, Peter had occasionally walked over there and stood for a while gazing at this lingering vestige of his name.

He went over there now, in soft hat and light overcoat, and carrying his heavy cane—hurried over there, in fact—across the Square and on under the Sixth Avenue elevated into that quaint section of the great city which socialists, anarchists, feminists, Freudian psycho-analysts of self, magazine writers, Jewish intellectuals, sculptors and painters of all nationalities and grades, sex hygiene enthusiasts, theatrical press-agents and various sorts of youthful experimenters in living share with the merely poor.

He stopped at a familiar spot on the curb by a familiar battered lamp-post and peered across the street.

Then he started—and stared. Surprise ran into bewilderment, bewilderment into utter dejection.

The faded, torn twenty-four-sheet poster had vanished.

A new brand of cut plug tobacco was advertised there now.

Ragged children of the merely poor, cluttering pavement and sidewalk, fell against him in their play. Irritably he brushed them aside.

It was indeed the end.

A young woman was crossing the street toward him, nimbly dodging behind a push cart and in front of a coal truck. Deep in self, he lowered his gaze and watched her. So intent was his stare that the girl stopped short, one foot on the curb, slowly lowered the apple she was eating, and looked straight at him.

She was shaped like a boy, he decided—good shoulders, no hips, fine hands (she wore no gloves, though the March air was crisp) and trim feet in small, flat-heeled tan boots. Her hair, he thought, was cut short. He was not certain, for her "artistic" tam o'shanter covered it and hung low on her neck behind. He moved a step to one side and looked more closely. Yes, it was short. Not docked, in the current fashion, but cut close to her head, like a boy's.

She stepped up on the curb now and confronted him. He noted that her suit was of brown stuff, loosely and comfortably cut; and that the boyish outer coat, which she wore swinging open, was of a rough plaid. Then he became aware of her eyes. They were deep green and vivid. Her skin was a clear olive, prettily tinted by air and exercise . . . Peter suddenly knew that he was turning red.

She spoke first.

"Hadn't we better say something?" was her remark. Then she took another bite of the apple, and munched it with honest relish.

"Very likely we would better," he managed to reply—rather severely, for the "had better" phrase always annoyed him.

"It seems as if I must have met you somewhere," he ventured next.

"No, we haven't met."

"My name is Mann."

"Yes," said she, "I know it."

"Then suppose you tell me yours?"

"Why?"

Peter could not think of a reason why. Deeply as he was supposed to understand women, here was a new variety. She was inclined neither to flirt nor to run away.

"How is it that you know who I am?" he asked, sparring for time.

She gave a careless shrug. "Oh, most every one is known, here in the Village."

Peter was always at his best when recognized as *the* Eric Mann. His spirits rose a bit.

"Might I suggest that we have a cup of tea somewhere?"

She knit her brows. "Yes," she replied slowly, even doubtfully, "you might."

"Of course, if you—"

"Jim's isn't far. Let's go there."

Jim's was an oyster and chop emporium of ancient fame in the Village. They sat at a rear table. The place was empty save for an old waiter who shuffled through the sprinkling of sawdust on the floor, and a fat grandson of the original Jim who stood by the open grill that was set in the wall at the rear end of the oyster bar.

Over the tea Peter said, expanding now—"Perhaps this is reason enough for you to tell me who you are."

"Perhaps what is?"

He smilingly passed the toast.

She took a slice, and considered it.

"You see," he went on, "if I am not to know, how on earth am I to manage seeing you again?"

She slowly inclined her head. "That's just it."

It was Peter's turn to knit his brows.

"How can I be sure that I want you to see me again?"

He waved an exasperated hand. "Then why are we here?"

"To find out."

At least he could smoke. He opened his cigarette case. Then, though he never felt right about women smoking, he extended it toward her.

"Thanks," said she, taking one and casually lighting it. Yes, she *had* fine hands. And he had noted when she took off her coat and reached up to hang it on the wall rack, her youth-like suppleness of body. A provocative person!

"I've seen some of your plays," she observed, elbows on table, chin on hand, gazing at the smoke-wraiths of her cigarette. "Two or three. *Odd Change* and *Anchored* and—what was it called?"

"*The Buzzard?*"

"Yes, *The Buzzard.* They were dreadful."

The color slowly left Peter's face. The girl was speaking without the slightest self-consciousness or wish to offend. She meant it.

Peter managed to recover some part of his poise. "Well!" he said. Then: "If they were all dreadful, why didn't you stop after the first?"

"Oh,"—she waved her cigarette—"*Odd Change* came to town when I was in college, and—"

"So you're a college girl?"

"Yes. And a crowd of us went. That one wasn't so bad as the others. You know your tricks well enough—especially in comedy, carpentered comedy.

Theatrically, I suppose you're really pretty good or your things wouldn't succeed. It is when you try to deal with life—and with women—that you're . . . ." Words failed her. She smoked in silence.

"I'm what?" he ventured. "The limit?"

"Yes," she replied, very thoughtful. "Since you've said it."

"All right," he cried, aiming at a gay humor and missing heavily—"but now, having slapped me in the face and thrown me out in the snow, don't you think that you'd better—" He hesitated, watching for a smile that failed to make its appearance.

"That I'd better what?"

"Well—tell me a little more?"

"I was wondering if I could. The difficulty is, it's the whole thing—your attitude toward life—the perfectly conventional, perfectly unimaginative home and mother stuff, your hopeless sentimentality about women, the slushy, horrible, immoral Broadway falseness that lies back of everything you do—the Broadway thing, always. Even in your comedy, good as that sometimes is. Your insight into life is just about that of a hardened director of one-reel films. What I've been wondering since we met this afternoon—you see, I didn't know that we were going to meet in this way . . ."

"Naturally."

". . . is whether it would be any use to try and help you. You have ability enough."

"Thanks for that!"

"Don't let's trifle! You see, if it is any use at all to try to get a little—just a little—truth into the American theater, why, those of us that believe in truth owe it to our faith to get to work on the men that supply the plays."

"Doubtless." Peter's mind was racing in a dozen directions at once. This extraordinary young person had hit close; that much he knew. He wondered rather helplessly whether the shattered and scattered remnants of his self-esteem could ever be put together again so the cracks wouldn't show.

The confusing thing was that he couldn't, at the moment, feel angry toward the girl; she was too odd and too pretty. Already he was conscious of a considerable emotional stir, caused by her mere presence there across the table. She reached out now for another cigarette.

"I think," said he gloomily, "that you'd better tell me your name."

She shook her head. "I'll tell you how you can find me out."

"How?"

"You would have to take a little trouble."

"Glad to."

"Come to the Crossroads Theater to-night, in Tenth Street."

"Oh—that little place of Zanin's."

She nodded. "That little place of Zanin's."

"I've never been there."

"I know you haven't. None of the people that might be helped by it ever come. You see, we aren't professional, artificialized actors. We are just trying to deal naturally with bits of real life—from the Russian, and things that are written here in the Village. Jacob Zanin is a big man—a fine natural man—with a touch of genius, I think."

Peter was silent. He knew this brilliant, hulking Russian Jew, and disliked him; even feared him in a way, as he feared others of his race with what he felt to be their hard clear minds, their vehement idealism, their insistent pushing upward. The play that had triumphantly displaced his last failure at the Astoria Theater was written by a Russian Jew.

She added: "In some ways it is the only interesting theater in New York."

"There is so much to see."

"I know." She sighed. "And we don't play every night, of course. Only Friday and Saturday."

He was regarding her now with kindling interest. "What do you do there?"

"Oh, nothing much. I'm playing a boy this month in Zanin's one-act piece, *Any Street.* And sometimes I dance. I was on my way there when I met you—was due at three o'clock."

"For a rehearsal, I suppose."

She nodded.

"You won't make it. It's four-fifteen now."

"I know it."

"You're playing a boy," he mused. "I wonder if that is why you cut off your hair." He felt brutally daring in saying this. He had never been direct with women or with direct women. But this girl created her own atmosphere which quite enveloped him.

"Yes," said she simply, "I had to for the part."

Never would he have believed that the attractive woman lived who would do that!

Abruptly, as if acting on an impulse, she pushed back her chair. "I'm going," she remarked; adding: "You'll find you have friends who know me."

She was getting into her coat now. He hurried awkwardly around the table, and helped her.

"Tell me," said he, suddenly all questions, now

that he was losing her—"You live here in the Village, I take it?"

"Yes."

"Alone?"

She nearly smiled. "No, with another girl."

"Do I know her?"

She pursed her lips. "I doubt it." A moment more of hesitation, then: "Her name is Deane, Betty Deane."

"I've heard that name. Yes, I've seen her—at the Black and White ball this winter! A blonde—pretty—went as a Picabia dancer."

They were mounting the steps to the sidewalk (for Jim's is in a basement).

"Good-by," said she. "Will you come—to-night or to-morrow?"

"Yes," said he. "To-night." And walked in a daze back to the rooms on Washington Square.

CHAPTER II

THE SEVENTH-STORY MEN

NOT until he was crossing Sixth Avenue, under the elevated road, did it occur to him that she had deliberately broken her rehearsal appointment to have tea with him and then as deliberately, had left him for the rehearsal. He had interested her; then, all at once, he had ceased to interest her. It was not the first time Peter had had this experience with women, though none of the others had been so frank about it.

Frank, she certainly was!

Resentments rose. Why on earth had he sat there so meekly and let her go on like that—he, the more or less well-known Eric Mann! Had he no force of character at all? No dignity?

Suppose she had to write plays to suit the whims of penny-splitting Broadway managers who had never heard of Andreyev and Tchekov, were bored

by Shaw and Shakespeare and thought an optimist was an eye doctor—where would *she* get off!

During the short block between Sixth Avenue and the Square, anger conquered depression. When he entered the old brick apartment building he was muttering. When he left the elevator and walked along the dark corridor to the rooms he was considering reprisals.

Peter shared the dim old seventh-floor apartment with two fellow bachelors, Henry Sidenham Lowe and the Worm. The three were sometimes known as the Seventh-Story Men. The phrase was Hy Lowe's and referred to the newspaper stories of that absurd kidnaping escapade—the Esther MacLeod case, it was—back in 1913. The three were a bit younger then.

Hy Lowe was a slim young man with small features that appeared to be gathered in the middle of his face. His job might have been thought odd anywhere save in the Greenwich Village region. After some years of newspaper work he had settled down to the managing editorship of a missionary weekly known as *My Brother's Keeper.* Hy was uncommunicative, even irreverent regarding his means of livelihood, usually referring to the paper as his meal ticket, and to his employer, the Rev-

erend Doctor Hubbell Harkness Wilde (if at all) as the Walrus. In leisure moments, perhaps as a chronic reaction from the moral strain of his job, Hy affected slang, musical comedy and girls. The partly skinned old upright piano in the studio was his. And he had a small gift at juggling plates.

The Worm was a philosopher; about Peter's age, sandy in coloring but mild in nature, reflective to the point of self-effacement. He read interminably, in more than one foreign language and was supposed to write book reviews. He had lived in odd corners of the earth and knew Gorki personally. His name was Henry Bates.

Peter came slowly into the studio, threw off coat and hat and stood, the beginnings of a complacent smile on his face.

"I've got my girl," he announced.

"Now that you've got her, what you gonna do with her?" queried Hy Lowe, without turning from the new song hit he was picking out on the piano.

"What am I gonna do with her?" mused Peter, hands deep in pockets, more and more pleased with his new attitude of mind—"I'm gonna vivisect her, of course."

"Ah, cruel one!" hummed Hy.

"Well, why not!" cried Peter, rousing. "If a

girl leaves her home and strikes out for the self-expression thing, doesn't she forfeit the consideration of decent people? Isn't she fair game?"

Over in the corner by a window, his attention caught by this outbreak, the Worm looked up at Peter and reflected for a moment. He was deep in a Morris chair, the Worm, clad only in striped pajamas that were not over-equipped with buttons, and one slipper of Chinese straw that dangled from an elevated foot.

"Hey, Pete—get this!" cried Hy, and burst into song.

Peter leaned over his shoulder and sang the choppy refrain with him. In the interest of accuracy the two sang it again. The third rendition brought them to the borders of harmony.

The Worm looked up again and studied Peter's back, rather absently as if puzzling him out and classifying him. He knit his brows. Then his eyes lighted, and he turned back in his book, fingering the pages with a mild eagerness. Finding what he sought, he read thoughtfully and smiled. He closed his book; hitched forward to the old flat-top desk that stood between the windows; lighted a caked brier pipe; and after considerable scribbling on scraps of paper appeared to hit upon an arrange-

ment of phrases that pleased him. These phrases he printed out painstakingly on the back of a calling card which he tacked up (with a hair-brush) on the outer side of the apartment door. Then he went into the bedroom to dress.

"Who is she?" asked Hy in a low voice. The two were fond of the Worm, but they never talked with him about their girls.

"That's the interesting thing," said Peter. "I don't know. She's plumb mysterious. All she'd tell was that she is playing a boy at that little Cross-roads Theater of Zanin's, and that I'd have to go there to find her out. Going to-night. Want to come along?"

"What kind of a looking girl?"

"Oh—pretty. Extraordinary eyes, green with brown in 'em—but green. And built like a boy. Very graceful."

"Hm!" mused Hy.

"Do you know her?"

"Sounds like Sue Wilde."

"Not—"

"Yes, the Walrus's child."

"What's *she* doing, playing around the Village?"

"Oh, that's an old story. She left home—walked

right out. Calls herself modern. She's the original lady highbrow, if you ask me. Sure I'll go to see her. Even if she never could see me."

Later, Hy remarked: "The old boy asked me yesterday if I had her address. You see he knows we live down here where the Village crowds circulate."

"Give it to him?"

"No. Easy enough to get, of course, but I ducked . . . I'm going to hop into the bathtub. There's time enough. Then we can eat at the Parisian."

Peter settled down to read the sporting page of the evening paper. Shortly the Worm, clad now, drifted back to the Morris chair.

They heard Hy shuffle out in his bath slippers and close the outer door after him. Then he opened the door and came back. He stood in the doorway, holding his bathrobe together with one hand and swinging his towel with the other; and chuckling.

"You Worm!" he observed. "Why Bolbo*cee*ras?"

The Worm looked up with mild eyes. "Not bolbo*cee*ras," he corrected. "Bol*boss*eras. As in cow."

"But why?"

The Worm merely shrugged his shoulders and resumed his book.

Peter paid little heed to this brief conversation. And when he and Hy went out, half an hour later, he gave only a passing glance to the card on the door. He was occupied with thoughts of a slim girl with green eyes who had fascinated and angered him in a most confusing way.

The card read as follows:

DO NOT FEED OR ANNOY!

BOLBOCERAS AMERICANUS MULS

HABITAT HERE!

CHAPTER III

JACOB ZANIN

THE Crossroads Theater was nothing more than an old store, with a shallow stage built in at the rear and a rough foyer boarded off at the front. The seats were rows of undertaker's chairs. But the lighting was managed with some skill; and the scenery, built and painted in the neighborhood, bordered on a Barker-Craig-Reinhardt effectiveness.

Peter and Hy stood for a little time in the foyer, watching the audience come in. It was a distinctly youthful audience—the girls and women were attractive, most of them Americans; the men running more foreign, with a good many Russian Jews among them. They all appeared to be great friends. And they handled one another a good deal. Peter, self-conscious, hunting copy as always, saw one tired-looking young Jewish painter catch the hand of a pretty girl—an extraordinarily pretty girl,

blonde, of a slimly rounded figure—and press and caress her fingers as he chatted casually with a group.

After a moment the girl drew her hand away gently, half-apologetically, while a faint wave of color flowed to her transparent cheek.

All Peter's blind race prejudice flamed into a little fire of rage. Here it was—his subject—the restless American girl experimenting with life, the selfish bachelor girl, deep in the tangles of Bohemia, surrounded by just the experimental men that would be drawn to the district by such as she. . . . So Peter read it. And he was torn by confused clashing emotions. Then he heard a fresh voice cry: "Why, hello, Betty!" Then he remembered—this girl was the Picabia dancer—Betty Deane—her friend! There was color in his own face now, and his pulse was leaping.

"Come," he said shortly to Hy, "let's find our seats."

The first playlet on the bill was Zanin's *Any Street.*

The theme was the grim influence of street life on the mind of a child. It was an uncomfortable little play. All curtains were drawn back. Subjects were mentioned that should never, Peter felt, be even

hinted at in the presence of young women. Rough direct words were hurled at that audience.

Peter, blushing, peered about him. There sat the young women and girls by the dozen, serene of face, frankly interested.

Poor Hy, overcome by his tangled self-consciousness, actually lowered his head and pressed his handkerchief to his fiery face, murmuring: "This is no place for a minister's assistant!" And he added, in Peter's ear: "Lord, if the Walrus could just see this—once!"

Then a newsboy came running on the stage—slim, light of foot—dodged cowering in a saloon doorway, and swore at an off-stage policeman from whose clutches he had escaped.

There was a swift pattering of applause; and a whisper ran through the audience. Peter heard one voice say: "There she is—that's Sue!"

He sat erect, on the edge of his chair. Again the hot color surged into his face. He felt it there and was confused.

It was his girl of the apple, in old coat and knickerbockers, torn stockings, torn shirt open at the neck, a ragged felt hat over her short hair.

Peter felt his resentment fading. He knew as he watched her move about the stage that she had the

curious electric quality that is called personality. It was in her face and the poise of her head, in the lines of her body, in every easy movement. She had a great gift.

After this play the two went outside to smoke, very silent, suppressed even. Neither knew what to think or what to say.

There Zanin found them (for Peter was, after all, a bit of a personage) and made them his guests.

Thus it was that Peter found himself behind the scenes, meeting the youthful, preoccupied members of the company and watching with half-suppressed eagerness the narrow stairway by which Sue Wilde must sooner or later mount from the region of dressing-rooms below.

Finally, just before the curtain was rung up on the second play, he was rewarded by the appearance of Betty Deane, followed by the tam o'shanter and the plaid coat of his apple girl.

He wondered if her heart was jumping as his was.

Surely the electric thrill of this meeting, here among heaps of scenery and properties, must have touched her, too. He could not believe that it began and ended with himself. There was magic in the occasion, such magic as an individual rarely gener-

ates alone. But if it touched her, she gave no outward sign. To Zanin's casual, "Oh, you know each other," she responded with a quite matter-of-fact smile and nod.

They went out into the audience, and up an aisle to seats in the rear of the hall—Betty first, then Sue and Peter, then Hy.

Peter felt the thrill again in walking just behind her, aware through his very nerve-tips of her grace and charm of movement. When he stood aside to let her pass on to her seat her sleeve brushed his arm; and the arm, his body, his brain, tingled and flamed.

Zanin joined them after the last play and led them to a basement restaurant near the Square. Hy paired off with Betty and made progress. But then, Betty was evidently more Hy's sort than Sue was.

In the restaurant, Peter, silent, gloomy, watched his chance for a word aside with Sue. When it came, he said: "I'm very glad you told me to come."

"You liked it, then?"

"I liked you."

This appeared to silence her.

"You have distinction. Your performance was really interesting."

"I'm glad you think that."

"In some ways you are the most gifted girl I have ever seen. Listen! I must see you again."

She smiled.

"Let's have a bite together one of these evenings —at the Parisian or Jim's. I want to talk with you."

"That would be pleasant," said she, after a moment's hesitation.

"To-morrow evening, perhaps?" Peter suggested.

The question was not answered; for in some way the talk became general just then. Later Peter was sure that Sue herself had a hand in making it general.

Zanin turned suddenly to Peter. He was a big young man, with a strong if peasant-like face and a look of keenness about the eyes. There was exuberant force in the man, over which his Village manner of sophisticated casualness toward all things lay like the thinnest of veneers.

"Well," he said, "what do you think of Sue here?"

Peter repeated his impressions with enthusiasm.

"We're going to do big things with her," said Zanin. "Big things. You wait. *Any Street* is just a beginning." And then an impetuous eagerness rushing up in him, his topic shifted from Sue

to himself. With a turbulent, passionate egotism he recounted his early difficulties in America, his struggles with the language, heart-breaking summers as a book agent, newspaper jobs in middle-western cities, theatrical press work from Coast to Coast, his plunge into the battle for a higher standard of theatrical art and the resulting fight, most desperate of his life thus far, to attract attention to the Crossroads Theater and widen its influence.

Zanin was vehement now. Words poured in a torrent from his lips. He talked straight at you, gesturing, with a light in his eye and veiled power in his slightly husky voice. Peter felt this power, and something not unlike a hatred of the man took sudden root within him.

"You will think me foolish to give my strength to this struggle. Like you, I know these Americans. You can tell me nothing about them. Oh, I have seen them, lived with them—in the city, in the small village, on the farm. I know that they are ignorant of Art, that they do not care." He snapped his big fingers. "Vaudeville, baseball, the girl show, the comic supplement, the moving picture—that is what they like! Yet year after year, I go on fighting for the barest recognition. They do not understand. They do not care. They believe in money, com-

fire, confidently—above all confidently. They are fools. But I know them, I tell you! And I know that they will listen to me yet! I have shown them that I can fight for my kinds. Before we are through I shall show them that I can beat them at their own game. They shall see that I mean business. I shall show them that God Success is his full majesty. . . . And publicity? They are children. When I have finished they—the best of them—will come to me for kindergarten lessons in publicity. I'm hoping to talk with you about it, Miami. I can interest you. I wouldn't bring it to you unless I knew I could interest you."

He turned toward Sue. "And this girl shall help me. She has the talent, the courage, the breeding. She will surprise the best of them. They will find her pure gold."

Flushed with his own enthusiasm, he dropped his hand over one of Sue's; took hers up in both of his and moved her slender fingers about as he might have played absently with a handkerchief or a cartain string.

He across the table, took this in, and noted too the swift hot expression that flitted across Peter's face and the sudden set to his mouth.

Sue, after a moment, quietly withdrew her hand. But she did not flush, as Betty had flushed in somewhat similar circumstances a few hours earlier.

Peter laid his hands on the table; pushed back his chair; and, lips compressed, got up.

"Oh," cried Zanin—"not going?"

"I must," Peter replied, slowly, coldly. "I have work to do. It has been very pleasant. Good night."

And out he went.

Hy, after some hesitation, followed.

Peter did not speak until they were nearly across the Square. Then he remembered—

"The Walrus asked you where she was, did he?"

"He sure did."

"Worried about her, I suppose!"

"He's worried, all right."

"Humph!" said Peter.

He said nothing more. At the rooms, he partly undressed in silence. Now and again his long face worked in mute expression of conflicting emotions within. Suddenly he stopped undressing and went into the studio (he slept in there, on the couch) and sat by the window, peering out at the lights of the Square.

Hy watched him curiously; then called out a good night, turned off the gas and tumbled into bed. His final remark, the cheery observation—"I'll tell you this much, my son. Friend Betty is some pippin!" drew forth no response.

CHAPTER IV

A LITTLE JOURNEY IN PARANOIA

HALF an hour later Peter tiptoed over and closed the door. Then he sat down at his typewriter, removed the paper he had left in it, put in a new sheet and struck off a word.

He sat still, then, in a sweat. The noise of the keys fell on his tense ears like the crackling thunder of a machine gun.

He took the paper out and tore it into minute pieces.

He got another sheet, sat down at the desk and wrote a few hurried sentences in longhand.

He sealed it in an envelope, glancing nervously about the room; addressed it; and found a stamp in the desk.

Then he tiptoed down the room, softly opened the door and listened.

Hy was snoring.

He stole into the bedroom, found his clothes in the dark and deliberately dressed, clear to overcoat

and hat. He slipped out into the corridor, rang for the elevator and went out across the Square to the mail box. There was a box in the hall down-stairs; but he had found it impossible to post that letter before the eyes of John, the night man.

For a moment he stood motionless, one hand gripping the box, the other holding the letter in air —a statue of a man.

Then he saw a sauntering policeman, shivered, dropped the letter in and almost ran home.

Peter had done the one thing that he himself, twelve hours earlier, would have regarded as utterly impossible.

He had sent an anonymous letter.

It was addressed to the Reverend Hubbell Harkness Wilde, Scripture House, New York. It conveyed to that vigorous if pietistic gentleman the information that he would find his daughter, on the following evening, Saturday, performing on the stage of the Crossroads Theater, Tenth Street, near Fourth; with the added hint that it might not, even yet, be too late to save her.

And Peter, all in a tremor now, knew that he meant to be at the Crossroads Theater himself to see this little drama of surprises come off.

The fact developed when Hy came back from

the office on Saturday that he was meditating a return engagement with his new friend Betty. "The subject was mentioned," he explained, rather self-consciously, to Peter.

The Worm came in then and heard Hy speak of *Any Street*.

"Oh," he observed, "that piece of Zanin's! I've meant to see it. You fellows going to-night? I'll join you."

So the three Seventh-Story Men ate at the Parisian and set forth for their little adventure; Peter and Hy each with his own set of motives locked up in his breast, the Worm with no motives in particular.

Peter smoked a cigar; the Worm his pipe; and Hy, as always, a cigarette. All carried sticks.

Peter walked in the middle; his face rather drawn; peering out ahead.

Hy swung his stick; joked about this and that; offered an experimentally humorous eye to every young woman that passed.

The Worm wore the old gray suit that he could not remember to keep pressed, soft black hat, flowing tie, no overcoat. A side pocket bulged with a paper-covered book in the Russian tongue. He had an odd way of walking, the Worm, throwing his

right leg out and around and toeing in with his right foot.

As they neared the little theater, Peter's pulse beat a tattoo against his temples. What if old Wilde hadn't received the letter! If he had, would he come! If he came, what would happen?

He came.

Peter and the Worm were standing near the inner entrance, waiting for Hy, who, cigarette drooping from his nether lip, stood in the line at the ticket window.

Suddenly a man appeared—a stranger, from the casually curious glances he drew—elbowing in through the group in the outer doorway and made straight for the young poet who was taking tickets.

Peter did not see him at first. Then the Worm nudged his elbow and whispered—"Good God, it's the Walrus!"

Peter wheeled about. He had met the man only once or twice, a year back; now he took him in—a big man, heavy in the shoulders and neck, past middle age, with a wide thin orator's mouth surrounded by deep lines. He had a big hooked nose (a strong nose!) and striking vivid eyes of a pale green color. They struck you, those eyes, with their light hard surface. There were strips of whis-

kers on each cheek, narrow and close-clipped, tinged with gray. His clothes, overcoat and hat were black; his collar a low turnover; his tie a loosely knotted white bow.

He made an oddly dramatic figure in that easy, merry Bohemian setting; a specter from an old forgotten world of Puritanism.

The intruder addressed the young poet at the door in a low but determined voice.

"I wish to see Miss Susan Wilde."

"I'm afraid you can't now, sir. She will be in costume by this time."

"In costume, eh?" Doctor Wilde was frowning. And the poet eyed him with cool suspicion.

"Yes, she is in the first play."

Still the big man frowned and compressed that wide mobile mouth. Peter, all alert, sniffing out the copy trail, noted that he was nervously clasping his hands.

Now Doctor Wilde spoke, with a sudden ring in his voice that gave a fleeting hint of inner suppressions. "Will you kindly send word to Miss Wilde that her father is here and must see her at once?"

The poet, surprised, sent the message.

Peter heard a door open, down by the stage. He

pressed forward, peering eagerly. A ripple of curiosity and friendly interest ran through that part of the audience that was already seated. A young man called, "What's your hurry, Sue?" and there was laughter.

Then he saw her, coming lightly, swiftly up the side aisle; in the boy costume—the knickerbockers, the torn stockings, the old coat and ragged hat, the torn shirt, open at the neck. She seemed hardly to hear the noise. Her lips were compressed, and Peter suddenly saw that she in her fresh young way looked not unlike the big man at the door, the nervously intent man who stood waiting for her with a scowl that wavered into an expression of utter unbelief as his eyes took in her costume.

Hy came up just then with the tickets, and Peter hurried in after Doctor Wilde; then let Hy and the Worm move on without him to their seats, lingerng shamelessly. His little drama was on. He had announced that he would vivisect this girl!

He studied her. But she saw nothing but the big gray man there with the deeply lined face and the pale eyes—her father! Peter noted now that she had her make-up on; an odd effect around those deep blazing eyes.

Then the two were talking—low, tense. Some late

comers crowded in, chatting and laughing. Peter edged closer.

"But you shouldn't have come here like this," he heard her saying. "It isn't fair!"

"I am not here to argue. Once more, will you put on your proper clothes and come home with me?"

"No, I will not."

"You have no shame then—appearing like this?"

"No—none."

"And the publicity means nothing to you?"

"You are causing it by coming here."

"It is nothing to you that your actions are a public scandal?" With which he handed her a folded paper.

She did not look at it; crumpled it in her hand.

"You feel, then, no concern for the position you put me in?"

Doctor Wilde was raising his voice.

The girl broke out with—"Listen, father! I came out here to meet you and stop this thing, settle it once and for all. It is the best way. I will not go with you. I have my own life to live. You must not try to speak to me again!"

She turned away, her eyes darkly alight in her painted face, her slim body quivering.

"Sue! Wait!"

Wilde's voice had been trembling with anger; now, Peter thought, it was suddenly near to breaking. He reached out one uncertain hand. And a wave of sympathy for the man flooded Peter's thoughts. "This is where their 'freedom,' their 'self-expression' leads them," he thought bitterly. Egotism! Selfishness! Spiritual anarchy! It was all summed up, that revolt, in the girl's outrageous costume as she stood there before that older man, a minister, her own father!

She caught the new note in her father's voice, hesitated the merest instant, but then went straight down the aisle, lips tight, eyes aflame, seeing and hearing nothing.

The stage door opened. She ran up the steps, and Peter caught a glimpse of the hulking Zanin reaching out with a familiar hand to take her arm and draw her within. . . . He turned back in time to see Doctor Wilde, beaten, walking rapidly out to the street, and the poet at the door looking after him with an expression of sheer uncomprehending irritation on his keen young face. "There you have it again!" thought Peter. "There you have the bachelor girl—and her friends!"

While he was thus indulging his emotions, the curtain went up on Zanin's little play.

He stood there near the door, trying to listen. He was too excited to sit down. Turbulent emotions were rioting within him, making consecutive thought impossible. He caught bits of Zanin's rough dialogue. He saw Sue make her entrance, heard the shout of delighted approval that greeted her, the prolonged applause, the cries of "Bully for you, Sue!" . . . "You're all right, Sue!"

Then Peter plunged out the door and walked feverishly about the Village streets. He stopped at a saloon and had a drink.

But the Crossroads Theater fascinated him. He drifted back there and looked in. The first play was over. Hy was in a dim corner of the lobby, talking confidentially with Betty Deane.

Then Sue came out with the Worm, of all persons, at her elbow. So *he* had managed to meet her, too? She wore her street dress and looked amazingly calm.

Peter dodged around the corner. "The way to get on with women," he reflected savagely, "is to have no feelings, no capacity for emotion, be perfectly cold blooded!"

He walked up to Fourteenth Street and dropped aimlessly into a moving-picture show.

Toward eleven he went back to Tenth Street. He even ran a little, breathlessly, for fear he might be too late. Too late for what, he did not know.

But he was not. Glancing in at the door, he saw Sue, with Betty, Hy, the Worm, Zanin and a few others.

Hurriedly, on an impulse, he found an envelope in his pocket, tore off the back, and scribbled, in pencil—

"May I walk back with you? I want very much to talk with you. If you could slip away from these people."

He went in then, grave and dignified, bowing rather stiffly. Sue appeared not to see him.

He moved to her side and spoke low. She did not reply.

The blood came rushing to Peter's face. Anger stirred. He slipped the folded envelope into her hand. It was some satisfaction that she had either to take it or let them all see it drop. She took it; but still ignored him. Her intent to snub him was clear now, even to the bewildered Peter.

He mumbled something, he did not know what,

and rushed away as erratically as he had come. What had he wanted to say to her, anyway!

At the corner he turned and came part way back, slowly and uncertainly. But what he saw checked him. The Worm was talking apart with her now. And she was looking up into his face with an expression of pleased interest, frankly smiling. While Peter watched, the two moved off along the street.

Peter walked the streets, in a fever of spirit. One o'clock found him out on the high curve of the Williamsburg bridge where he could lean on the railing and look down on the river with its colored splashes of light or up and across at the myriad twinkling towers of the great city.

"I'll use her!" he muttered. "She is fair game, I tell you! She will find yet that she must listen to me!" And turning about on the deserted bridge, Peter clenched his fist and shook it at the great still city on the island.

"You will all listen to me yet!" he cried aloud. "Yes, you will—you'll listen!"

CHAPTER V

PETER TREADS THE HEIGHTS

HE walked rapidly back to the rooms. For his bachelor girl play was swiftly, like magic, working itself out all new in his mind, actually taking form from moment to moment, arranging and rearranging itself nearer and nearer to a complete dramatic story. The big scene was fairly tumbling into form. He saw it as clearly as if it were being enacted before his eyes. . . . Father and daughter—the two generations; the solid Old, the experimental selfish New.

He could see that typical bachelor girl, too. If she looked like Sue Wilde that didn't matter. He would teach her a lesson she would never forget—this "modern" girl who forgets all her parents have done in giving and developing her life and thinks only of her own selfish freedom. It should be like an outcry from the old hearthstone.

And he saw the picture as only a nerve-racked, soul-weary bachelor can see it. There were pleas-

ant lawns in Peter's ideal home and crackling fireplaces and merry children and smiling perfect parents—no problems, excepting that one of the unfilial child.

Boys had to strike out, of course. But the girl should either marry or stay at home. He was certain about this.

On those who did neither—on the bachelor girls, with their "freedom," their "truth," their cigarettes, their repudiation of all responsibility—on these he would pour the scorn of his genius. Sue Wilde, who so plainly thought him uninteresting, should be his target.

He would write straight at her, every minute, and a world should hear him!

In the dark corridor, on the apartment door, a dim square of white caught his eye—the Worm's little placard. An inner voice whispered to light a match and read it again. He did so. For he was all inner voices now.

There it was:

DO NOT FEED OR ANNOY
BOLBOCERAS AMERICANUS MULS
HABITAT HERE!

He studied it while his match burned out. He

knit his brows, puzzled, groping after blind thoughts, little moles of thoughts deep in dark burrows.

He let himself in. The others were asleep.

The Worm, in his odd humors, never lacked point or meaning. The placard meant something, of course . . . something that Peter could use. . . .

The Worm had been reading—that rather fat book lying even now on the arm of the Morris chair. It was *Fabre, on Insect Life.*

He snatched it up and turned the pages. He sought the index for that word. There it was—Bolboceras, page 225. Back then to page 225!

He read:

". . . a pretty little black beetle, with a pale, velvety abdomen . . . Its official title is *Bolboceras Gallicus Muls.*"

He looked up, in perplexity. This was hardly self-explanatory. He read on. The bolboceras, it began to appear, was a hunter of truffles. Truffles it would, must have. It would eat no common food but wandered about sniffing out its vegetable prey in the sandy soil and digging for each separate morsel, then moving on in its quest. It made no permanent home for itself.

Peter raised his eyes and stared at the bookcase in the corner. Very slowly a light crept into his eyes, an excited smile came to the corners of his mouth. There was matter here! And Peter, like Homer, felt no hesitation about taking his own where he found it.

He read on, a description of the burrows as explored by the hand of the scientist:

"Often the insect will be found at the bottom of its burrow; sometimes a male, sometimes a female, but always alone. The two sexes work apart without collaboration. This is no family mansion for the rearing of offspring; it is a temporary dwelling, made by each insect for its own benefit."

Peter laid the book down almost reverently and stood gazing out the window at the Square. He quite forgot to consider what the Worm had been thinking of when he printed out the little placard and tacked it on the door. He could see it only as a perfect characterization of the bachelor girls. Every one of those girls and women was a *Bolboceras,* a confirmed seeker of pleasures and delicacies in the sober game of life, utterly self-indulgent, going it alone—a truffle hunter.

He would call his play, *The Bolboceras.*

But no. "Buyers from Shreveport would fumble it," he thought, shrewdly practical. "You've got to use words of one syllable on Broadway."

He paced the room—back and forth, back and forth. *The Truffle-Hunter,* perhaps.

Pretty good, that!

But no—wait! He stood motionless in the middle of the long room, eyes staring, the muscles of his face strained out of shape, hands clenched tightly. He was about to create a new thing.

"The Truffler!"

The words burst from his lips; so loud that he tiptoed to the door and listened.

"The Truffler," he repeated. *"The Trifler*—no *The Truffler."*

He was riding high, far above all worldly irritations, tolerant even toward the little person, Sue Wilde, who had momentarily annoyed him.

"I had to be stirred," he thought, "that was all. Something had to happen to rouse me and set my creative self working. New people had to come into my life to freshen me. It did happen; they did come, and now I am myself again. I shall not have time for them now, these selfish bachelor women and their self-styled Jew geniuses. But still I am grateful to them all. They have helped me."

He dropped into the chair by the desk, pulled out his manuscript from a drawer and fell to work. It was five in the morning before he crept into bed.

Four days later, his eyes sunken perceptibly, face drawn, color off, Peter sat for two hours within a cramped disorderly office, reading aloud to a Broadway theatrical manager who wore his hat tipped down over his eyes, kept his feet on the mahogany desk, smoked panatelas end on end and who, like Peter, was deeply conservative where women were concerned.

At five-thirty on this same afternoon, Peter, triumphant, acting on a wholly unconsidered impulse, rushed around the corner of Broadway and Forty-second Street and into the telephone room of a glittering hotel. He found Betty Deane's name in the telephone book, and called up the apartment.

A feminine voice sounded in his ear. He thought it was Sue Wilde.

It *was* Sue Wilde.

He asked if she could not dine with him.

There was a long silence at the other end of the wire.

"Are you there?" he called anxiously. "Hello! Hello!"

"Yes, I'm here," came the voice. "You rather

surprised me, Mr. Mann. I have an engagement for this evening."

"Oh, then I can't see you!"

"I have an engagement."

He tried desperately to think up conversation; but failed.

"Well," he said—"*good-by.*"

"Good-by."

That was all. Peter ate alone, still overstrung but gloomy now, in the glittering hotel.

The dinner, however, was both well-cooked and hot. It tended to soothe and soften him. Finally, expansive again, he leaned back, fingered his coffee cup, smoked a twenty-cent cigar and observed the life about him.

There were many large dressy women, escorted by sharp-looking men of two races. There were also small dressy women, some mere girls and pretty, but nearly all wearing make-up on cheeks and lips and quite all with extreme sophistication in their eyes. There was shining silver and much white linen. Chafing dishes blazed. French and Austrian waiters moved swiftly about under the commanding eye of a stern captain. Uniformed but pocketless hat boys slipped in and out, pouncing on every loose

article of apparel. . . . It was a gay scene; and Peter found himself in it, of it, for it. With rising exultation in his heart he reflected that he was back on Broadway, where (after all) he belonged.

His manager of the afternoon came in now, who believed, with Peter, that woman's place was the home. He was in evening dress—a fat man. At his side tripped a very young-appearing girl indeed—the youngest and prettiest in the room, but with the make-up and sophistication of the others. Men (and women) stared at them as they passed. There was whispering; for this was the successful Max Neuerman, and the girl was the lucky Eileen O'Rourke.

Neuerman sighted Peter, greeted him boisterously, himself drew up an unoccupied chair. Peter was made acquainted with Miss O'Rourke. "This is the man, Eileen," said Neuerman, breathing confidences. "Wrote *The Truffler*. Big thing! Absolutely a new note on Broadway! Eric here has caught the new bachelor woman, shown her up and put a tag on her. After this she'll be called a truffler everywhere. . . . By the way, Eric, I sent the contract down to you to-night by messenger. And the check."

Miss Eileen O'Rourke smiled indulgently and a thought absently. While Peter lighted, thanks to Neuerman, a thirty-cent cigar and impulsively told Miss O'Rourke (who continued to smile indulgently and absently) just how he had come to hit on that remarkable tag.

It was nearly nine o'clock when he left and walked, very erect, from the restaurant, conscious of a hundred eyes on his back. He gave the hat boy a quarter.

Out on Forty-second Street he paused to clear his exuberant but confused mind. He couldn't go back to the rooms; not as he felt now. Cabarets bored him. It was too early for dancing. Irresolute, he strolled over toward Fifth Avenue, crossed it, turned south. A north-bound automobile bus stopped just ahead of him. He glanced up at the roof. There appeared to be a vacant seat or two. In front was the illuminated sign that meant Riverside Drive. It was warm for February.

He decided to take the ride.

Just in front of him, however, also moving toward the bus, was a young couple. There was something familiar about them. The girl—he could see by a corner light—was wearing a boyish coat, a plaid coat. Also she wore a tam o'shanter. She partly

turned her head . . . his pulse started racing, and he felt the color rushing into his face. It was Sue Wilde, no other!

But the man? No overcoat. That soft black hat! A glimpse of a flowing tie of black silk! The odd trick of throwing his right leg out and around as he walked and toeing in with the right foot!

It was the Worm.

Peter turned sharply away, crossed the street and caught a south-bound bus. Wavering between irritation, elation and chagrin, he walked in and out among the twisted old streets of Greenwich Village. Four distinct times—and for no clear reason—he passed the dingy apartment building where Sue and Betty lived.

Later he found himself standing motionless on a curb by a battered lamp-post, peering through his large horn-rimmed eye-glasses at a bill-board across the street on which his name did not appear. He studied the twenty-four-sheet poster of a cut plug tobacco that now occupied the space. There was light enough in the street to read it by.

Suddenly he turned and looked to the right. Then he looked to the left. Fumbling for a pencil, he moved swiftly and resolutely across the street. Very small, down in the right-hand corner of the tobacco

advertisement, he wrote his name—his pen name—"Eric Mann."

Then, more nearly at peace with himself, he went to the moving pictures.

Entering the rooms later, he found the Worm settled, in pajamas as usual, with a book in the Morris chair. He also found a big envelope from Neuerman with the contract in it and a check for a thousand dollars, advanced against royalties.

It was a brown check. He fingered it for a moment, while his spirits recorded their highest mark for the day. Then, outwardly calm, he put it in an inside coat pocket and with a fine air of carelessness tossed the contract to the desk.

The Worm put down his book and studied Peter rather thoughtfully.

"Pete," he finally said, "I've got a message for you, and I've been sitting here debating whether to deliver it or not."

"Let's have it!" replied *the* Eric Mann shortly.

The Worm produced a folded envelope from the pocket of his pajamas and handed it over. "I haven't been told what's in it," he said.

Peter, with a tremor, unfolded the envelope and peered inside. There were two enclosures—one plainly his scribbled note to Sue; the other (he had

to draw it partly out and examine it)—yes—no—yes, his anonymous letter, much crumpled.

Deliberately, rather white about the mouth, Peter moved to the fireplace, touched a match to the papers and watched them burn. That done, he turned and queried:

"Well? That all?"

The Worm shook his head. "Not quite all, Pete."

Words suddenly came from Peter. "What do I care for that girl! A creative artist has his reactions, of course. He even does foolish things. Look at Wagner, Burns, Cellini, Michael Angelo—look at the things they used to do! . . ."

The words stopped.

"Her message is," continued the Worm, "the suggestion that next time you write one of them with your left hand."

Peter thought this over. The check glowed next to his heart. It thrilled him. "You tell your friend Sue Wilde," he replied then, with dignity, "that my message to her—and to you—will be delivered next September across the footlights of the Astoria Theater." And he strode into the bedroom.

The Worm looked after him with quizzical eyes, smiled a little and resumed his book.

CHAPTER VI

THE WORM POURS OIL ON A FIRE

PETER came stealthily into the rooms on the seventh floor of the old bachelor apartment building in Washington Square. His right hand, deep in a pocket of his spring overcoat, clutched a thin, very new book bound in pasteboard. It was late on a Friday afternoon, near the lamb-like close of March.

The rooms were empty. Which fact brought relief to Peter.

He crossed the studio to the decrepit flat-top desk between the two windows. With an expression of gravity, almost of solemnity, on his long face, he unlocked the middle drawer on the end next the wall. Within, on a heap of manuscripts, letters and contracts, lay five other thin little books in gray, buff and pink. He spread these in a row on the desk and added the new one. On each was the name of a savings bank, printed, and his own name, writ-

ten. They represented savings aggregating now nearly seven thousand dollars.

Seven thousand dollars, for a bachelor of thirty-three, may seem enough to you. It did not seem enough to Peter. In fact he was now studying the six little books through his big horn-rimmed glasses (not spectacles) with more than a suggestion of anxiety. Peter was no financier; and the thought of adventuring his savings on the turbulent uncharted seas of finance filled his mind with terrors. Savings banks appealed to him because they were built solidly, of stone, and had immense iron gratings at windows and doors. And, too, you couldn't draw money without going to some definite personal trouble. . . . It is only fair to add that the books represented all he had or would ever have unless he could get more. Nobody paid Peter a salary. No banker or attorney had a hand in taxing his income at the source. *The Truffler* might succeed and make him mildly rich. Or it might die in a night, leaving the thousand-dollar "advance against royalties" as his entire income from more than a year of work. His last two plays had failed, you know. Plays usually failed. Eighty or ninety per cent. of them —yes, a good ninety!

Theoretically, the seven thousand dollars should

carry him two or three years. Practically, they might not carry him one. For he couldn't possibly know in advance what he would do with them. Genius laughs at savings banks.

Peter sighed, put the six little books away and locked the drawer.

Locked it with sudden swiftness and caution, for Hy Lowe just then burst in the outer door and dove, humming a one-step, into the bedroom.

Peter, pocketing the keys carefully so that they would not jingle, put on a casual front and followed him there.

Hy, still in overcoat and hat, was gazing with rapt eyes at a snap-shot of two girls. He laughed a little, self-consciously, at the sight of Peter and set the picture against the mirror on his side of the bureau.

There were other pictures stuck about Hy's end of the mirror; all of girls and not all discreet. One of these, pushed aside to make room for the new one, fell to the floor. Hy let it lie.

Peter leaned over and peered at the snap-shot. He recognized the two girls as Betty Deane and Sue Wilde.

"Look here," said Peter, "where have you been?"

"Having a dish of tea."

They represented savings aggregating now nearly seven thousand dollars

"Don't you ever work?"

"Since friend Betty turned up, my son, I'm wondering if I ever shall."

Peter grunted. His gaze was centered not on Hy's friend Betty, but on the slim familiar figure at the right.

"Just you two?"

"Sue came in. Look here, Pete, I'm generous. We're going to cut it in half. I get Betty, you get Sue."

Peter, deepening gloom on his face, sat down abruptly on the bed.

"Easy, my son," observed Hy sagely, "or that girl will be going to your head. That's your trouble, Pete; you take 'em seriously. And believe me, it won't do!"

"It isn't that, Hy—I'm not in love with her."

There was a silence while Hy removed garments.

"It isn't that," protested Peter again. "No, it isn't that. She irritates me."

Hy took off his collar.

"Any—anybody else there?" asked Peter.

"Only that fellow Zanin. He came in with Sue. By the way, he wants to see you. Seems to have an idea he can interest you in a scheme he's got. Talked quite a lot about it."

Peter did not hear all of this. At the mention of Zanin he got up suddenly and rushed off into the studio.

Hy glanced after him; then hummed (more softly, out of a new respect for Peter) a hesitation waltz as he cut the new picture in half with the manicure scissors and put Sue on Peter's side of the bureau.

The Worm came in, dropped coat and hat on a chair and settled himself to his pipe and the evening paper. Peter, stretched on the couch, greeted him with a grunt. Hy appeared, in undress, and attacked the piano with half-suppressed exuberance.

It was the Worm's settled habit to read straight through the paper without a word; then to stroll out to dinner, alone or with the other two, as it happened, either silent or making quietly casual remarks that you didn't particularly need to answer if you didn't feel like it. He made no demands on you, the Worm. He wasn't trivial and gay, like Hy; or burning with inner ambitions and desires, like Peter.

On this occasion, however, he broke bounds. Slowly the paper, not half read, sank to his knees. He smoked up a pipeful thus. His sandy thoughtful face was sober.

Finally he spoke.

"Saw Sue Wilde to-day. Met her outside the Parisian, and we had lunch together."

Peter shot a glance at him.

The Worm, oblivious to Peter, tamped his pipe with a pencil and spoke again.

"Been trying to make her out. She and I have had several talks. I can't place her."

This was so unusual—from the Worm it amounted to an outburst!—that even Hy, swinging around from the yellow keyboard, waited in silence.

"You fellows know Greenwich Village," the musing one went on, puffing slowly and following with his eyes the curling smoke. "You know the dope—'Oats for Women!' somebody called it—that a woman must be free as a man, free to go to the devil if she chooses. You know, so often, when these feminine professors of freedom talk to you how they over-emphasize the sex business—by the second quarter-hour you find yourself solemnly talking woman's complete life, rights of the unmarried mother, birth control; and after you've got away from the lady you can't for the life of you figure out how those topics ever got started, when likely as not you were thinking about your job or

the war or Honus Wagner's batting slump. You know."

Hy nodded, with a quizzical look. Peter was motionless and silent.

"You know—I don't want to knock; got too much respect for the real idealists here in the Village—but you fellows do know how you get to anticipating that stuff and discounting it before it comes; and you can't help seeing that the woman is more often than not just dressing up ungoverned desires in sociological language, that she's leaping at the chance to experiment with emotions that women have had to suppress for ages. Back of it is the new Russianism they live and breathe—to know no right or wrong, trust your instincts, respond to your emotions, bow to your desires. . . . Well, now, here's Sue Wilde. She looks like a regular little radical. And acts it. Breaks away from her folks—lives with the regular bunch in the Village—takes up public dancing and acting—smokes her cigarettes—knows her Strindberg and Freud—yet . . . well, I've dined with her once, lunched with her once, spent five hours in her apartment talking Isadora Duncan as against Pavlowa, even walked the streets half a night arguing about what she calls the Truth

. . . and we haven't got around to 'the complete life' yet."

"How do you dope it out?" asked Hy.

"Well"—the Worm deliberately thought out his reply—"I think she's so. Most of 'em aren't so. She's a real natural oasis in a desert of poseurs. Probably that's why I worry about her."

"Why worry?" From Hy.

"True enough. But I do. It's the situation she has drifted into, I suppose. If she was really mature you'd let her look out for herself. It's the old he protective instinct in me, I suppose. The one thing on earth she would resent more than anything else. But this fellow Zanin . . ."

He painstakingly made a smoke ring and sent it toward the tarnished brass hook on the window-frame. It missed. He tried again.

Peter stirred uncomfortably, there on the couch. "What has she told you about Zanin?" he asked, desperately controlling his voice.

"She doesn't know that she has told me much of anything. But she has talked her work and prospects. And the real story comes through. Just this afternoon since I left her, it has been piecing itself together. She is frank, you know."

Peter suppressed a groan. She was frank!

"Zanin is in love with her. He has been for a year or more. He wrote *Any Street* for her, incorporated some of her own ideas in it. He has been tireless at helping her work up her dancing and pantomime. Why, as near as I can see, the man has been downright devoting his life to her, all this time. It's rather impressive. But then, Zanin *is* impressive."

Peter broke out now. "Does he expect to marry her—Zanin?"

"Marry her? Oh, no."

" 'Oh, no!' Good God then—"

"Oh, come, Pete, you surely know Zanin's attitude toward marriage. He has written enough on the subject. And lectured—and put it in those little plays of his."

"What *is* his attitude?"

"That marriage is immoral. Worse than immoral—vicious. He has expounded that stuff for years."

"And what does she say to all this?" This question came from Hy, for Peter was speechless.

"Simply that he doesn't rouse any emotional response in her. I'm not sure that she isn't a little sorry he doesn't. She would be honest you know.

And that's the thing about Sue—my guess about her, at least—that she won't approach love as an experiment or an experience. It will have to be the real thing."

He tried again, in his slow calm way, to hang a smoke ring on the brass hook.

"Proceed," said Hy. "Your narrative interests me strangely."

"Well," said the Worm slowly, "Zanin is about ready to put over his big scheme. He has contrived at last to get one of the managers interested. And it hangs on Sue's personality. The way he has worked it out with her, planning it as a concrete expression of that half wild, natural self of hers, I doubt if it, this particular thing, could be done without her. It *is* Sue—an expressed, interpreted Sue."

"This must be the thing he is trying to get Pete in on."

"The same. Zanin knows that where he fails is on the side of popularity. He has intelligence, but he hasn't the trick of reaching the crowd. And he is smart enough to see what he needs and go after it."

"He is going after the crowd, then?"

"Absolutely."

"And what becomes of the noble artistic standards he's been bleeding and dying for?"

"I don't know. He really has been bleeding and dying. You have to admit that. He lives in one mean room, over there in Fourth Street. A good deal of the little he eats he cooks with his own hands on a kerosene stove. Those girls are always taking him in and feeding him up. He works twenty and thirty hours at a stretch over his productions at the Crossroads. Must have the constitution of a bull elephant. If it was just a matter of picking up money, he could easily go back into newspaper work or the press-agent game. . . . I'm not sure that the man isn't full of a struggling genius that hasn't really begun to find expression. If he is, it will drive him into bigger and bigger things. He won't worry about consistency—he'll just do what every genius does, he'll fight his way through to complete self-expression, blindly, madly, using everything that comes in his way, trampling on everything that he can't use."

Peter, twitching with irritation, sat up and snorted out:

"For God's sake, what's the *scheme!*"

The Worm regarded Peter thoughtfully and not unhumorously, as if reflecting further over his observations on genius. Then he explained:

"He's going to preach the Greenwich Village free-

dom on every little moving-picture screen in America—shout the new naturalism to a hypocritical world."

"Has he worked out his story?" asked Hy.

"In the rough, I think. But he wants a practical theatrical man to give it form and put it over. That's where Pete comes in. . . . Get it? It's daring stuff. He'll use Sue's finest quality, her faith, as well as her grace of body. What I could get out of it sounds a good deal like the Garden of Eden story without the moral. An Artzibasheff paradise. Sue says that she'll have to wear a pretty primitive costume."

"Which doesn't bother her, I imagine," said Hy.

"Not a bit."

Peter, leaning back on stiff arms, staring at the opposite wall, suddenly found repictured to his mind's eye a dramatic little scene: In the Crossroads Theater, out by the ticket entrance; the audience in their seats, old Wilde, the Walrus himself, in his oddly primitive, early Methodist dress—long black coat, white bow tie, narrow strip of whisker on each grim cheek; Sue in her newsboy costume, hair cut short under the ragged felt hat, face painted for the stage, her deep-green eyes blazing. The father had said: "You have no shame, then—appearing like

this?" To which the daughter had replied: "No—none!"

Hy was speaking again. "You don't mean to say that Zanin will be able to put this scheme over on Sue?"

The Worm nodded, very thoughtful. "Yes, she is going into it, I think."

Peter broke out again: "But—but—but—but . . ."

"You fellows want to get this thing straight in your heads," the Worm continued, ignoring Peter. "Her reasons aren't by any means so weak. In the first place the thing comes to her as a real chance to express in the widest possible way her own protest against conventionality. As Zanin has told her, she will be able to express naturalness and honesty of life to millions where Isadora Duncan, with all her perfect art, can only reach thousands. Yes, Zanin is appealing to her best qualities. And, at that, I'm not at all sure that he isn't honest in it."

"Honest!" snorted Peter.

"Yes, honest. I don't say he is. I say I'm not sure. . . . Then another argument with her is that he has really been helping her to grow. He has given her a lot—and without making any crude demands. Obligations have grown up there, you see.

She knows that his whole heart is in it, that it's probably his big chance; and while the girl is modest enough she can see how dependent the whole plan is on her."

"But — but — but"—Peter again!—"think what she'll find herself up against—the people she'll have to work with—the vulgarity . . ."

"I don't know," mused the Worm. "I'm not sure it would bother her much. Those things don't seem to touch her. And she isn't the sort to be stopped by conventional warnings, anyway. She'll have to find it out all for herself."

The Worm gave himself up again to the experiment with smoke rings. He blew one—another—a third—at the curtain hook. The fourth wavered down over the hook, hung a second, broke and trailed off into the atmosphere. "Got it!" said the Worm, to himself.

"Who's the manager he's picked up?" asked Hy.

"Fellow named Silverstone. Head of a movie producing company."

Peter, to whom this name was, apparently, the last straw, shivered a little, sprang to his feet, and for the second time within the hour rushed blindly off into solitude.

CHAPTER VII

PETER THINKS ABOUT THE PICTURES

WHEN Hy set out for dinner, a little later, he found Peter sitting on a bench in the Square.

"Go in and get your overcoat," said Hy. "Unless you're out for pneumonia."

"Hy," said Peter, his color vivid, his eyes wild, "we can't let those brutes play with Sue like that. We've got to save her."

Hy squinted down at his bamboo stick. "Very good, my son. But just how?"

"If I could talk with her, Hy! . . . I know that game so well!"

"You could call her up—"

"Call her up nothing! I can't ask to see her and start cold." He gestured vehemently. "Look here, you're seeing Betty every day—you fix it."

Hy mused. "They're great hands to take tramps in the country, those two. Most every Sunday.

. . . If I could arrange a little party of four. . . . See here! Betty's going to have dinner with me to-morrow night."

"For God's sake, Hy, get me in on it!"

"Now you just wait! Sue'll be playing to-morrow night at the Crossroads. It's Saturday, you know."

Peter's face fell.

"But it gives me the chance to talk it over with friend Betty and perhaps plan for Sunday. If Zanin'll just leave her alone that long."

"It isn't as if I were thinking of myself, Hy . . ."

"Of course not, Pete."

"The girl's in danger. We've *got* to save her."

"What if she won't listen! She's high-strung."

"Then," said Peter, flaring up with a righteous passion that made him feel suddenly like the hero of his own new play—"then I'll go straight to Zanin and force him to declare himself! I will face him, as man to man!"

Thus the two Seventh-Story Men!

At moments, during the few weeks just past, thoughts of his anonymous letter had risen to disturb Peter; on each occasion, until to-night, to be instantly overwhelmed by the buoyant egotism that always justified Peter to himself. But the thoughts

had been there. They had kept him from attempts to see Sue, had even restrained him from appearing where there was likelihood of her seeing him; and they had kept him excited about her. Now they rose again in unsuspected strength. Of course she would refuse to see him! He slept hardly at all that night. The next day he was unstrung. And Saturday night (or early Sunday morning) when Hy crept in, Peter, in pajamas, all lights out, was sitting by the window nursing a headache, staring out with smarting eyeballs at the empty Square.

"Worm here?" asked Hy guardedly.

"Asleep."

Hy lighted the gas; then looked closely at the wretched Peter.

"Look here, my son," he said then, "you need sleep."

"Sleep"—muttered Peter, "good God!"

"Yes, I know, but you've got a delicate job on your hands. It'll take expert handling. You've got to be fit."

"Did you—did you see Sue?"

"No, only Betty. But they've been talking you over. Sue told Betty that you interest her."

"Oh—she did! Say anything else?"

"More or less. Look here—has anything hap-

pened that I'm not in on? I mean between you and Sue."

Peter shivered slightly. "How could anything happen? I haven't been seeing her."

"Well—Sue says you're the strangest man she ever knew. She can't figure you out. Betty was wondering."

Hy was removing his overcoat now. Suddenly he gave way to a soft little chuckle.

"For Heaven's sake, don't laugh!"

"I was thinking of something else. Yes, I fixed it. But there's something up—a new deal. This here Silverstone saw *Any Street* last night and went dippy over Sue. Betty told me that much but says she can't tell me the rest because it's Sue's secret, not hers. Only it came out that Zanin has dropped the idea of bringing you into it. Silverstone bought supper for the girls and Zanin last night, and this afternoon he took Zanin out to his Long Beach house for the night, in a big car. And took his stenographer along. Everybody's mysterious and in a hurry. Oh, there's a hen on, all right!"

"So I'm out!" muttered Peter between set teeth. "But it's no mystery. Think I don't know Silverstone?"

"What'll he do?"

"Freeze out everybody and put Sue across himself. What's that guy's is his. Findings is keepings."

"But will Sue let him freeze Zanin out?"

"That's a point. . . . But if she won't, he'll be wise in a minute. Trust Silverstone! He'll let Zanin *think* he's in, then."

"Things look worse, I take it."

"A lot."

Hy was undressing. He sat now, caught by a sudden fragrant memory, holding a shoe in mid-air, and chuckled again.

"Stop that cackle!" growled Peter. "You said you fixed it."

"I did. Quit abusing me and you'll realize that I'm coming through with all you could ask. We leave at eleven, Hudson Tunnel, for the Jersey hills —we four. I bring the girls; you meet us at the Tunnel. Zanin is safe at Long Beach. We eat at a country road house. We walk miles in the open country. We drift home in the evening, God knows when! . . . Here I hand you, in one neat parcel, pleasant hillsides, purling brooks, twelve mortal hours of the blessed damosel, and"—he caught up the evening paper—" 'fair and warmer'—and perfect weather. And what do I get? Abuse. Nothing but abuse!"

With this, he deftly juggled his two shoes, caught both in a final flourish, looked across at the abject Peter and grinned.

"Shut up," muttered Peter wearily.

"Very good, sir. And you go to bed. Your nerves are a mess."

Into Peter's brain as he hurried toward the Tunnel Station, the next morning, darted an uninvited, startling thought.

Here was Zanin, idealist in the drama, prophet of the new Russianism, deserting the stage for the screen!

What was it the Worm had represented him as saying to Sue . . . that she would be enabled to express her ideals to millions where Isadora Duncan could reach only thousands?

Millions in place of thousands!

His imagination pounced on the thought. He stopped short on the street to consider it—until a small boy laughed; then he hurried on.

He looked with new eyes at the bill-boards he passed. Two-thirds of them flaunted moving-picture features. . . . He had been passing such posters for a year or more without once reading out of them a meaning personal to himself. He had been sticking blindly, doggedly to plays—ninety

per cent. of which, of all plays, failed utterly. It suddenly came home to him that the greatest dramatists, like the greatest actors and actresses, were working for the camera. All but himself, apparently! . . . The theaters were fighting for the barest existence where they were not surrendering outright. Why, he himself patronized movies more often than plays! Yet he had stupidly refused to catch the significance of it. . . . *The Truffler* would fail, of course; just as the two before it had failed. Still he had, until this actual minute, clung to it as his one hope.

Millions for thousands!

He was thinking now not of persons but of dollars.

Millions for thousands.

He paused at a news stand. Sprawled over it were specimens of the new sort of periodical, the moving-picture magazines. So the publishers, like the theatrical men, were being driven back by the invader.

He bought the fattest, most brightly colored of these publications and turned the pages eagerly as he descended into the station.

He stood half-hidden behind a pillar, his eyes wandering from the magazine to the ticket gate where Hy and the two girls would appear, then back

to the magazine. Those pages reeked of enthusiasm, fresh ideas, prosperity. They stirred new depths within his soul.

He saw his little party coming in through the gate.

The two girls wore sweaters. Their skirts were short, their tan shoes low and flat of heel.

They were attractive, each in her individual way; Sue less regular as to features, but brighter, slimmer, more alive. Betty's more luxurious figure was set off almost too well by the snug sweater. As she moved, swaying a little from the hips, her eyelids drooping rather languidly, the color stirring faintly under her fair fine skin, she was, Peter decided, unconscious neither of the sweater nor of the body within it. . . . Just before the train roared in, while Sue, all alertness, was looking out along the track, Peter saw Hy's hand brush Betty's. For an instant their fingers intertwined; then the hands drifted casually apart.

CHAPTER VIII

SUE WALKS OVER A HILL

PETER joined them—a gloomy man, haunted by an anonymous letter. Sue was matter-of-fact. It seemed to Hy that she made some effort to put the well-known playwright more nearly at his ease.

They lunched, an hour's ride out in Northern New Jersey, at a little motorists' tavern that Hy guided them to. They sat on a shaded veranda while the men smoked cigars and the girls smoked cigarettes. After which they set forth on what was designed to be a four-hour tramp through the hills to another railroad—Sue and Peter ahead (as it turned out); Hy and Betty lagging behind.

The road curved over hills and down into miniature valleys. There were expanses of plowed fields, groves of tall bare trees, groups of farmhouses. Robins hopped beside the road. The bright sun mitigated the crisp sting in the air. A sense of early spring touched eye and ear and nostril.

Peter felt it; breathed more deeply; actually smiled.

Sue threw back her head and hummed softly.

Hy and Betty dropped farther and farther behind.

Once Sue turned and waved them on; then stood and laughed with sheer good humor at their deliberate, unrhythmical step.

"Come on," she said to Peter. "They don't get it—the joy of it. You have to walk with a steady swing. It takes you a mile or two, at that, to get going. When I'm in my stride, it carries me along so I hate to stop at all. You know, you can't pick it up again right off—the real swing. Walking is a game—a fine game!"

Peter didn't know. He had never thought of walking as a game. He played golf a little, tennis a little less. It had always been difficult for him to hold his mind on these unimportant pursuits. But he found himself responding eagerly.

"You've gone in a lot for athletics," said he, thinking of the lightness, the sheer ease, with which she had moved about the little Crossroads stage.

"Oh, yes—at school and college—basket ball, running, fencing, dancing and this sort of thing. Dancing especially. I've really worked some at that, you know."

"Yes," said he moodily, "I know."

They swung down into a valley, over a bridge, up the farther slope, through a notch and out along a little plateau with a stream winding across it.

Peter found himself in some danger of forgetting his earnest purpose. He could fairly taste the fresh spring air. He could not resist occasionally glancing sidelong at his companion and thinking—"She is great in that sweater!" A new soft magic was stealing in everywhere among what he had regarded as his real thoughts and ideas. Once her elbow brushed his; and little flames rose in his spirit. . . . She walked like a boy. She talked like a boy. She actually seemed to think like a boy. The Worm's remark came to him, with an odd stabbing effect . . . "We haven't got around to 'the complete life' yet!"

She quite bewildered him. For she distinctly was not a boy. She was a young woman. She couldn't possibly be so free from thoughts of self and the drama of life, of man and the all-conquering urge of nature! As a dramatist, as a student of women, he knew better. No, she couldn't—no more than "friend Betty" back there, philandering along with Hy. The Worm had guaranteed her innocence . . . but the Worm notoriously didn't understand

women. No, it couldn't be true. For she *had* broken away from her folks. She *did* live with the regular bunch in the Village. She *did* undoubtedly know her Strindberg and Freud. She *had* taken up public dancing and acting. She *did* smoke her cigarettes—had smoked one not half an hour back, publicly, on the veranda of a road house! . . . He felt again the irritation she had on other occasions stirred in him.

He slowed down, tense with this bewilderment. He drew his hand across his forehead.

Sue went on a little ahead; then stopped, turned and regarded him with friendly concern!

"Anything the matter?"

"No—oh, no!"

"Perhaps we started too soon after lunch."

She was babying him!

"No—no . . . I was thinking of something! . . ."

Almost angrily he struck out at a swift pace. He would show her who was the weakling in *this* little party! He would make her cry for mercy!

But she struck out with him. Swinging along at better than four miles an hour they followed the road into another valley and for a mile or two along by a bubbling brook,

It was Peter who slackened first. His feet began hurting; an old trouble with his arches. And despite the tang in the air, he was dripping with sweat. He mopped his forehead and made a desperate effort to breathe easily.

Sue was a thought flushed, there was a shine in her eyes; she danced a few steps in the road and smiled happily.

"That's the thing!" she cried. "That's the way I love to move along!"

Apparently she liked him better for walking like that. It really seemed to make a difference. He set his teeth and struck out again, saying—"All right. Let's have some more of it, then!" And sharp little pains shot through his insteps.

"No," said she, "it's best to slow down for a while. I like to speed up just now and then. Besides, I've got something on my mind. Let's talk."

He walked in silence, waiting.

"It's about that other talk we had," said she. "It has bothered me since. I told you your plays were dreadful. You remember?"

He laughed shortly. "Oh, yes; I remember."

"There," said she, "I did hurt you. I must have been perfectly outrageous."

He made no reply to this; merely mopped his

forehead again and strode along. The pains were shooting above the insteps now, clear up into the calves of his legs.

"I ought to have made myself plainer," said she. "I remember talking as if you couldn't write at all. Of course I didn't mean that, and I had no right to act as if I held myself superior to a man of your experience. That was silly. What I really meant was that you didn't write from a point of view that I could accept."

"What you said was," observed Peter, aiming at her sort of good-humored directness, and missing, "'the difficulty is, it's the whole thing—your attitude toward life—your hopeless sentimentality about women, the slushy horrible Broadway falseness that lies back of everything you do—the Broadway thing, always.' . . . Those were your words."

"Oh, no!" She was serious now. He thought she looked hurt, almost. The thought gave him sudden savage pleasure. "Surely, I didn't say that."

"You did. And you added that my insight into life is just about that of a hardened director of one-reel films."

She was hurt now. She walked on for a little time, quite silent.

Finally she stopped short, looked right at him, threw out her hands (he noted and felt the grace of the movement!) and said—

"I don't know how to answer you. Probably I did say just about those words . . ."

"They are exact."

". . . and of course, in one sense, I meant them. I do feel that way about your work. But not at all in the personal sense that you have taken it. And I recognize your ability as clearly as anybody. Can't you see, man—that's exactly the reason I talked that way to you?" There was feeling in her voice now. "I suppose I had a crazy, kiddish notion of converting you, of making you work for us. It was because you are so good at it that I went after you like that. You are worth going after." She hesitated, and bit her lip. "That's why I was so pleased when Zanin thought he needed you for our big plan and disappointed now that he can't include you in it—because you could help us and we could perhaps help you. Yes, disappointed—in spite of—and—and don't forget the other thing I said, that those of us that believe in truth in the theater owe it to our faith to get to work on the men that supply the plays. . . . Can't you see, man!"

She threw out her arms again. His eyes, some-

thing of the heady spirits that she would perhaps have called sex attraction shining in them now, could see little more than those arms, the slim curves of her body in the sweater and short skirt, her eager glowing face and fine eyes. And his mind could see no more than his eyes.

An automobile horn sounded. He caught her arm and hurried her to the roadside. There were more of the large bare trees here; and a rail fence by which they stood.

"You say Zanin has given up the idea of coming to me with his plan?" He spoke guardedly, thinking that he must not betray the confidences of Betty and Hy.

"Yes, he has had to."

"He spoke to me about it, once."

"Yes, I know. But the man that is going to back him wants to do that part of it himself or have his own director do it."

Pictures unreeled suddenly before his mind's eye —Sue, in "a pretty primitive costume," exploited at once by the egotistical self-seeking Zanin, the unscrupulous, masterful Silverstone, a temperamental, commercial director! He shivered.

"Look here," he began—he would fall back on his age and position; he would control this little situa-

tion, not drift through it!—"you mentioned my experience. Well, you're right. I've seen these Broadway managers with their coats off. And I've seen what happens to enthusiastic girls that fall into their hands."

He hesitated; that miserable letter flashed on his brain. He could fairly see it. And then his tongue ran wild.

"Don't you know that Broadway is paved with the skulls of enthusiastic girls! . . . Silverstone? Why, if I were to give you a tenth of Silverstone's history you would shrink from him—you wouldn't touch the man's ugly hand. Here you are, young, attractive—yes, beautiful, in your own strange way!—full of a real faith in what you call the truth, on the edge of giving up your youth and your gifts into the hands of a bunch of Broadway crooks. You talk about me and the Broadway Thing. Good God, can't you see that it's girls like you that make the Broadway Thing possible! . . . You talk of my sentimentality about women, my 'home-and-mother-stuff,' can't you see the reason for that home-and-mother stuff, for that sentimentality, is the tens of thousands of girls, like you and unlike you who wanted to experiment, who thought they could make the world what they wanted it!"

He paused to breathe. The girl before him was distinctly flushed now, and was facing him with wide eyes—hard eyes, he thought. He had poured out a flood of feeling, and it had left her cold.

She was leaning back against the fence, her arms extended along the top rail, looking and looking at him.

"Silverstone!" he snorted, unable to keep silence. "Silverstone! The man's a crook, I tell you. Nothing that he wants gets away from him. Understand me? Nothing! You people will be children beside him. . . . Zanin is bad enough. He's smart! He'll wait you out! He doesn't believe in marriage, he doesn't! But Zanin—why, Silverstone'll play with him!"

Her eyes were still on him—wide and cold. Now her lips parted, and she drew in a quick breath

"How on earth," she said, "did you learn all this! Who told you?"

He shut his lips close together. Plainly he had broken; he had gone wild, cleared the traces. Staring at her, at that sweater, he tried to think. . . . She would upbraid Betty. How would he ever square things with Hy!

He saw her hands grip the fence rail so tightly that her finger-tips went white.

"Tell me," she said again, with deliberate emphasis, "where you learned these things. Who told you?"

He felt rather than saw the movement of her body within the sweater as she breathed with a slow inhalation. His own breath came quickly. His throat was suddenly dry. He swallowed—once, twice. Then he stepped forward and laid his hand, a trembling hand, on her forearm.

She shook it off and sprang back.

"Don't look at me like that!" his voice said. And rushed on: "Can't you see that I'm pleading for your very life! Can't you see that I *know* what you are headed for—that I want to save you from yourself—that I love you—that I'm offering you my life—that I want to take you out of this crazy atmosphere of the Village and give . . ."

He stopped, partly because he was out of breath, and felt, besides, as if his tonsils had abruptly swollen and filled his throat; partly because she turned deliberately away from him.

He waited, uneasily leaning against the fence while she walked off a little way, very slowly; stood thinking; then came back. She looked rather white now, he thought.

"Suppose," she said, "we drop this and finish our

walk. It's a good three hours yet over to the other railroad. We may as well make a job of it."

"Oh, Sue," he cried—"how can you! . . ."

She stopped him. "Please!" she said.

"But—but—"

"Please!" she said again.

"But—but—"

She turned away. "I simply can not keep up this personal talk. I would be glad to finish the walk with you, but . . ."

He pulled himself together amid the wreckage of his thoughts and feelings. "But if I won't or can't, you'll have to walk alone," he said for her.

"Yes, I did mean that. I am sorry. I did hope it would be possible . . ." She compressed her lips, then added: "Of course I should have seen that it wasn't possible, after what happened."

"Very well," said he.

They walked on, silent, past the woods, past more plowed fields, up another hillside.

She broke the silence. Gravely, she said: "I will say just one thing more, since you already know so much. Zanin signs up with Silverstone to-morrow morning. Or as soon as they can finish drawing up the contracts. Then within one or two weeks—very soon, certainly—we go down to Cuba or Florida to

begin taking the outdoor scenes. That, you see, settles it."

Peter's mind blurred again. Ugly foggy thoughts rushed over it. He stopped short, his long gloomy face working nervously.

"Good God!" he broke out. "You mean to say—you're going to let those crooks take you off—to Cuba! Don't you see . . ."

There was no object in saying more. Even Peter could see that. For Sue, after one brief look at his sputtering, distorted face, had turned away and was now walking swiftly on up the hill.

"Wait!" he called. "Sue!"

She reached the top of the hill, passed on over the crest. Gradually she disappeared down the farther slope—the tam o'shanter last.

CHAPTER IX

THE NATURE FILM PRODUCING CO. INC.

THEN Peter, muttering, talking out loud to the road, the fence, the trees, the sky, turned back to retrace the miles they had covered so lightly and rapidly. His feet and legs hurt him cruelly. He found a rough stick, broke it over a rock and used it for a cane.

He thought of joining Hy and Betty. There would be sympathy there, perhaps. Hy could do something. Hy would have to do something.

Where were they, anyway!

Half an hour later he caught a glimpse of them. They were sitting on a boulder on a grassy hillside, some little distance from the road. They appeared to be gazing dreamily off across a valley.

Peter hesitated. They were very close together. They hardly seemed to invite interruption. Then, while he stood, dusty and bedraggled, in real pain, watching them, he saw Betty lean back against the boulder—or was it against Hy's arm?

Hy seemed to be leaning over her. His head bent lower still. It quite hid hers from view.

He was kissing her!

Blind to the shooting pains in his feet and legs, Peter rushed, stumbling, away. In his profound self-pity, he felt that even Hy had deserted him. He was alone, in a world that had no motive or thought but to do him evil, to pervert his finest motives, to crush him!

Somehow he got back to that railroad. An hour and a half he spent painfully sitting in the country station waiting for a train. There was time to think. There was time for nothing but thinking.

And Peter, as so often when deeply stirred either by joy or misery, found himself passing into a violent and soul-wrenching reaction. It was misery this time. He was a crawling abject thing. People would laugh. Sue would laugh . . .

But would she! Would she tell? Would Hy and Betty, if they ever did get home, know that she had returned alone?

Those deep-green eyes of hers, the strong little chin. . . . She was Miss Independence herself.

Zanin was signing with Silverstone in the morning! Or as soon as the contracts could be drawn. . . .

The train came rumbling in. Peter, in physical and spiritual agony, boarded it.

All these painful, exciting experiences of the day were drawing together toward some new unexpected result. He was beaten—yet was he beaten! A news agent walked through the train with a great pile of magazines on his arm.

Peter suddenly thought of the moving-picture periodical he had dropped, so long, long ago, in the Tunnel Station. He bought another copy; and again turned the pages. Then he let it fall to his knees and stared out the window with eyes that saw little.

Zanin—Silverstone—Sue walking alone over a hill! . . . Peter's little lamp of genius was burning once more. He was thrilled, if frightened, by the ideas that were forming in that curious mind of his.

Shortly after seven o'clock of the same evening Jacob Zanin reached his mean little room in Fourth Street, after a stirring twenty-four hours at Silverstone's house at Long Beach and an ineffectual attempt to find Sue in her rooms. Those rooms were dim and silent. No one answered his ring. No one answered his knock when he finally succeeded in following another tenant of the building into the

inner hall. Which explains why he was at his room, alone, at a quarter to eight when Peter Ericson Mann called there.

Peter, pale, nerves tense, a feverish glow in his eyes behind the horn-rimmed glasses, leaned heavily on a walking stick in the dark hallway, listening to the sound of heavy footsteps coming across the creaking boards on the other side of the door. Then the door opened; and Zanin, coatless, collarless, hair rumpled over his ears on either side of his head, stood there; a hulking figure of a man, full of force, not untouched with inner fire; a little grim; his face, that of a vigorously intellectual Russian peasant, scarred perceptibly by racial and personal hardship.

"Oh, hello, Mann!" said he. "Come in." Then, observing the stick: "What's the matter?"

"A little arch trouble. Nothing at all." And Peter limped in.

Peter, as on former occasions, felt the power of the fellow. It was altogether in character that he should exhibit no surprise, though Peter Ericson Mann had never before appeared before him at that door. (He would never know that it was Peter's seventh call within an hour and a half.)

Peter was at his calmest and most effective.

He looked casually about at the scant furniture, the soap boxes heaped with books, the kerosene stove, symbol of Zanin's martyrdom to his art.

"Zanin," he said, "two things stuck in my mind the other night when you and I had our little talk. One was the fact that you had got hold of a big idea; and that a man of your caliber wouldn't be giving his time to a proposition that didn't have something vital in it. . . . The other thing is Sue Wilde."

Zanin was tipped back in an armless wooden chair, taking Peter in with eyes that were shrewd and cold, but not particularly hostile.

"I didn't realize at the time what an impression that girl was making on me. But I haven't been able to shake it off. She has something distinctly unusual—call it beauty, charm, personality—I don't know what it is. But she has it."

"Yes," said Zanin, "she has it. But see here, Mann, the whole situation has changed since then—"

"Yes," Peter broke in. "I know."

"You know?"

Peter nodded, offhand. "Betty Deane has talked to Hy Lowe about it, and Hy has told me. I'm pretty well informed, as a matter of fact."

"You know about—"

"Silverstone? Yes. Tell me, have you closed with him?"

"Well"—Zanin hesitated. He was disturbed. "Not in writing, no."

"Don't you do it, then."

Zanin pursed his lips, hooked his feet around the legs of his chair and tapped on the front of the seat with his large fingers.

"It's regular money, Mann," he said.

"You said you could interest me. Why don't you try?"

"Regular money is regular money."

"Not if you don't get it."

"Why shouldn't I get it?"

"Because Silverstone will. And look what he'll do to your ideas—a conventional commercialist!"

Zanin considered this. "I've got to risk that. Or it looks so. This thing can't possibly be done cheap. I propose to do something really new in a feature film—new in groupings, new in lighting, new in the simplicity and naturalness of the acting. It will be a daring theme, highly controversial, which means building up publicity. It will take regular money. Sue is in just the right frame of mind. A year from now God knows what she'll be thinking

and feeling. She might turn square against our Village life, all of a sudden. I've seen it happen. . . . And now, with everything right, here the money comes to me on a platter. Lord, man, I've got to take it—risk or no risk!"

They were about to come to grips. Peter felt his skin turning cold. His throat went dry again, as in the afternoon.

"How much"—he asked, outwardly firmer than he would have dared hope—"how much do you need?"

Zanin really started now, and stared at him.

"See here," he said, "I've gone pretty far in with Silverstone."

"But you haven't signed?"

"No."

"Nor taken his money?"

"No."

Peter laughed shortly. "Do you think *he* would consider himself bound by anything you may have said! Silverstone!"

This was a point. He could see Zanin thinking it over.

"How much do you need?" he asked again.

"Well—"

"What do you think will happen the minute Sue really discovers the sort of hands she's in? Even if she would want to stick to you!"

This was another point.

"Well"—said Zanin, thinking fast—"it needn't be lavish, like these big battle films and such. But it will take money."

"How much money?"

"Three or four thousand. Maybe five or six. It means going south for the outdoor scenes. I want tropical foliage, so my people won't look frozen. And publicity isn't cheap, you know."

Peter gulped; but plunged on. "I'll tell you what you do, Zanin. Get another man—a littler producer than Silverstone—and have him supply studio, operators, and all the plant necessary, on a partnership basis, you to put in some part of the cash needed."

"Great!" said Zanin. "Fine! And where's the cash to come from?"

"From me."

The front legs of Zanin's chair came to the floor with a bang.

"This is new stuff, Mann."

"New stuff. I'm not rich, but I believe you've

got a big thing here, and I stand willing to put up a few thousand on a private contract with you. This can be just between ourselves. All I ask is a reasonable control of the expenditure."

Zanin thought—and thought. Peter could see the shifting lights in his cold clear eyes.

He moved over to the window and stared out into the area-way, where electric lamps and gas flames twinkled from a hundred other rear buildings. He came back to his chair and lit a cigarette.

"You're on!" he finally said. "If you want to know, I *am* worried about Silverstone. And I'm certainly in no position to turn down such an offer as this."

Which was the genesis of The Nature Film Producing Co., Inc., Jacob Zanin, Pres't. They talked late, these new partners.

It was nearly one o'clock in the morning when Peter limped into the rooms.

He found Hy sitting by the window in his pajamas, gazing rapturously at a lacy handerchief.

"Aha!" said Hy, "he comes! Never mind the hour, my boy! I take off my hat. You're better than I am—better than I! A *soupçon* of speed, ol' dear!"

Peter dropped limply into the Morris chair.

"What's the matter?" said Hy, observing him more closely. "You look done. Where's Sue?"

Peter composed himself. "I left Sue a long while ago. Hours ago."

"What on earth have you been doing?"

"Exactly what I promised you I'd do."

This was a new, an impressive Peter.

"I don't get you—"

"You said Sue might not listen to my warning."

"Oh—and she didn't?"

"She did not."

"And you—oh, you said you'd go to Zanin . . ."

"As man to man, Hy."

"Good lord, you haven't . . . Pete, you're limping! You didn't fight! . . ."

Peter solemnly shook his head. "It wasn't necessary, Hy," he said huskily; then cleared his throat. What was the matter with his throat to-day, anyway?

He sank back in his chair. His eyes closed.

Hy leaned forward with some anxiety. "Pete, what's the matter? You're white!"

Peter's head moved slowly. "Nothing's the matter." He slowly opened his eyes. "It has been a hard day, Hy, but the job is done."

"The job . . .?"

"I have saved her, Hy."

"But the pictures?"

"They will be taken under my direction."

"And Silverstone?"

"Silverstone is out. I control the company." He closed his eyes again and breathed slowly and evenly in a deliberate effort to calm his tumultuous nerves.

"Well!" said Hy, big-eyed. "Well!"

"Something to drink, Hy," Peter murmured. "I put it over, Hy! I put it over!" He said this with a little more vigor, trying to talk down certain sudden misgivings regarding six thin little books with pasteboard covers that lay at the moment in the middle drawer of the desk, next the wall.

Hy got slowly to his feet; stood rubbing his head and staring down in complete admiration at the apparently triumphant if unmistakably exhausted Peter.

"It's a queer time for them," Hy remarked, solemn himself now. "But in this case cocktails are certainly indicated."

He picked up the telephone. "John," he said to the night man below, "some ice!"

Then he shuffled to the closet, struck a match and found the shaker.

In the amber fluid they pledged the success of The Nature Film Producing Co., Inc., these Seventh-Story Men! Dwelling, the while, each in his own thoughts, on the essential nobility of sacrificing one's self to save another.

CHAPTER X

PETER THE MAGNIFICENT

"IF she strikes you as a girl you'd like to kiss, I should say, as a general principle—well, kiss her."

Thus Hy Lowe, musingly, seated on the decrepit flat-top desk between the two windows of the studio, swinging his legs.

Peter Ericson Mann met this observation with contempt. "Right off, I suppose! First time you meet her—just like that!"

The expert waved his cigarette. "Sure. Kiss her."

"She murmurs her thanks, doubtless."

"Not at all. She hates you. Won't ever speak to you again."

"Oh, really!" Peter was caustic.

"She didn't think you were that sort; and won't for a minute permit you to think she's that sort."

"And then?"

Another wave of the cigarette. "Slow down. Be kind to her. If she's a cross old thing, forgive

her. Let her see that you're a regular fellow, even if you did start from third base instead of first. Above all, keep cool. Avoid tragedy, scenes. Keep smiling. When she does swing round—well, you've kissed her. There you are!"

Peter surveyed his apartment mate with gloomy eyes. "Sue and Betty are two very different girls," said he.

"My son," replied Hy, "I am not discussing persons. I am enunciating a principle. What may have passed between friend Betty and me has nothing to do with it." He glanced at his watch. "Though I'll admit she is expecting me around this evening. She doesn't hate me, Pete. . . . Funny thing about Betty—she was telling me—there's a man up in her town pestering her to death. Letters and telegrams. Wants to marry her. He makes gas engines. Queer about these small-town fellows—they can't understand a free-spirited woman. Imagine Betty cooped up like that!"

"I'm not likely to be kissing Sue," growled Peter.

"My son, you've as good as done it already. From your own admission. Asked her to marry you. Right off, too—just like that! Can't you see it's the same thing in principle—shock and reaction! She'd have preferred the kiss of course—"

"You don't know that?"

"The trouble with you, Pete, is that you don't understand women. According to your own story again, you startled her so that she left you on a country road and walked ten miles alone rather than answer you. I tell you, get a woman real angry at you just once, and she can't be indifferent to you as long as she lives. Hate you—yes. Love you—yes. Indifferent—no. . . . You've started something. Give her time."

"Time!" snorted Peter. "Time!" He paced the long room; kicked the closet door shut; gave the piano keys a savage bang.

Hy watched Peter with growing concern. His eyes roved about the smoke-dimmed, high-ceiled studio. They had lived well here—himself, Peter and the Worm. Thanks to some unknown law of personality, they had got on, this odd trio, through the years. Girls and women had drifted into and out of their individual lives (for your New York bachelor does not inhabit a vacuum)—but never before had the specter of marriage stalked with disruptive import through these dingy rooms.

"Look here, Pete," he said, "why be so dam' serious about it!"

Peter paused in his pacing and stared at Hy.

. . . "Serious!" He repeated the word under his breath. His long face worked convulsively behind the large horn-rimmed glasses (not spectacles) and their black ribbon. Then abruptly he rushed into the bedroom and slammed the door behind him.

Hy sighed, glanced out at the weather (it was April), picked up hat, stick and gloves and sauntered forth to dine comfortably at his club as a ritualistic preliminary to a pleasant evening. That, he thought now, was the great thing about bachelor life in town. You had all the advantages of feminine companionship—in assorted varieties—and then when you preferred or if the ladies bored you you just went to the club.

Peter sat on the edge of the bed, all nerves, and thought about Sue Wilde. Also about six little bank books.

They had been his secret inner life, the bank books locked away in the middle drawer of the desk on the side next the wall. Nearly seven thousand dollars were now entered in those books—Peter's all. He was staking it on a single throw. He had rushed in where a shrewder theatrical angel might well have feared to tread. It was the wild outbreak of a cautious impractical man.

He thought it all over, sitting there on the edge

of the bed. It was terrifying, but stirring. In his plays some one was always saving a girl through an act of personal sacrifice. Now he was acting it out in life. Indicating the truth to life of his plays. . . . He was risking all. But so had Napoleon, returning from Elba, risked all (he did not pursue the analogy). So had Henry V at Agincourt. After all, considered in this light, it was rather fine. Certain persons would admire him if they knew. It was the way big men did things. He was glad that Sue didn't know; it was finer to take the plunge without so much as asking a return. It was magnificent.

The word, popping into his thoughts, gave Peter a thrill. Yes, it was magnificent. He was doing a magnificent thing. All that remained was to carry it off magnificently.

He dragged his trunk from the closet. The lower tray and the bottom were packed with photographs and with letters tied in flat bundles—letters in various feminine hands. He stirred the bundles about. Some were old—years old; others less so.

Peter regarded them with the detachment of exaltation. They could not possibly mean anything to him; his life had begun the day he first saw Sue Wilde.

He carried them into the studio, great armsful, and piled them about the hearth. In the bottom drawer of the bureau were other packets of intimate documents. He brought those as well. Then he set to work to burn, packet by packet, that curiously remote past life of his. And he smiled a little at this memory and that.

Closely packed papers do not burn easily. He was seated there on the floor before the fireplace, stirring up sheets at which the flames had nibbled, when Jacob Zanin came in.

Zanin stared and laughed.

"Bad as that?" said he.

Peter met this sally with dignified silence. He urged his caller to sit down.

Zanin dropped his hat on the desk and disposed his big frame in the Morris chair. His coat was wrinkled, his trousers baggy. Under his coat was an old gray sweater. The head above the sweater collar was big and well-poised. The face was hard and strong; the eyes were alight with restlessness.

"I'm dog tired," said Zanin. "Been rehearsing six hours straight." And he added: "I suppose you haven't had a chance to go over my scenario."

"I've done more than that," replied Peter calmly; "I've written a new one." And as Zanin's brows

came down questioningly he added: "I think you'll find I've pointed up your ideas. The thing was very strong. Once I got to thinking about it I couldn't let go. What it needed was clarifying and rearranging and building for climaxes. That's what makes it so hard for our people to understand you Russians—you are formless, chaotic."

"Like life," said Zanin.

"Perhaps. But not like our stage traditions. You wanted me to help you reach a popular audience. That's what I'm trying to do for you."

"Fine!" said Zanin doubtfully. "Let me take it along. I'll read it to-night—go over it with Sue, perhaps."

Peter shook his head.

"But I'll have to see it, Mann."

"I'll read it to you—to you and Sue," said Peter.

Zanin looked at him, faintly surprised and thinking.

Peter went back to the hearth, dropped on his knees and threw another bundle of letters into the fire.

"The fact is," said Zanin, hesitating, "I had some work planned for Sue this evening."

"No hurry," remarked Peter.

"Ah, but there is." Zanin hitched forward in his

chair. The eager hardness came again into his eyes. His strong, slightly husky voice rose a little.

"Why? How so?" Peter settled back on his heels and poked the fire.

"Look here, Mann—everything's just right for us now. I've interested the Interstellar people—that's partly what I came to say—they'll supply studio stuff for the interior scenes and a camera man. Also they'll stand a third of the expense. They're ready to sign whenever you are. And what's more important—well, here's the question of Sue."

"What's the question?"

"It's delicate—but I'll be frank."

"Better be. You and I are going into this as business men, Zanin."

"Exactly. As business men. Well—Sue's a girl, after all. In this thing we are staking a lot on her interest and enthusiasm—pretty nearly everything."

"Of course.

"Well, she's ready—eager. I know her pretty thoroughly, Mann. I've studied her. We have no real hold on her. She isn't a professional actress, to be hired at so much a week. Her only reason for going into it at all, is that she believes, with you and me, that the thing ought to be done. Now that's all right. It's fine! But it's going to take delicate

handling. A girl acts as she feels, you know. Right now Sue feels like doing my Nature film with all her might." He spread out his hands. In his eyes was an eager appeal. "God, Mann, that's all we've got! Don't you see? Just Sue's feelings!"

"I see," Peter replied. He threw the last heap of photographs on the fire. "But what was the frank thing?"

Zanin hesitated; drummed nervously on the chair-arm. "I'm coming to that. It's a bit awkward, Mann. It's—well, I am more or less in Sue's confidence, you know. I'm with her so much, I can sense her moods. . . . The fact is, Mann, if you'll let me say so, you don't seem to understand women."

"So I've been told," remarked Peter dryly. "Go on with it."

"Well, Sue's got it into her head that you don't get the idea of intelligent radicalism. That you're . . ."

"That I'm a reactionary."

"Yes—that you're a reactionary. She's worried about the scenario—afraid you'll miss the very point of it." Again he spread out his large strong hands. "So don't you see why I'm eager to get hold of it and read it to her"—he hesitated again, and knit his brows—"so I can reassure her . . . You see,

Mann, Sue just doesn't like you. That's the plain fact. You've hit her all wrong." He raised a hand to ward off Peter's interruption. "Oh, we'll straighten that out all right! But it'll take delicate handling—just now, while we're working out the scenario and planning the trip south—and so, meantime . . ."

"You would like me to keep out of Sue's way as much as possible."

"And leave everything to me, Mann. As it stands now, here she is, keen, all ready, once she's solid in her mind about the right spirit of the scenario, to start south with me. . . ."

Peter waved the poker in a series of small circles and figure eights; then held it motionless and sighted along it with squinted-up eyes.

"Why go south?" he asked.

Zanin gave a start and stared at him; then controlled himself, for the expenses of that little trip, two-thirds of them, at least, must be paid out of the funds entered in Peter's six little bank books.

"Why go south?" Zanin repeated, gropingly; then came back at Peter with a rush of words. "Good lord, Mann, don't you see that we're putting over a big piece of symbolism—the most delicate and difficult job on earth. This isn't *Shore Acres!* It

isn't the *Doll's House!* It's a realized dream, and it's got to be put across with such quality and power that it will fire a new dream in the public mind. I propose to spring right out at 'em, startle 'em—yes, shock 'em; and all the time keep it where they can't lay their vulgar hands on it. We can't show our Nature effects—primitive, half-nude people—against a background of a New Jersey farm land with a chestnut tree and a couple of oaks in the middle distance!"

"Pretty fine trees, those!" observed Peter.

"Not for a minute!" Zanin sprang to his feet; his voice rang. "Got to be remote, exotic—dream quality, fantasy all through. Florida or California—palm trees and such. Damn it, the thing's a poem! It's got to be done as a poem."

He strode down the room and back.

Peter got up, very calm, rather white about the mouth and watched him. . . . Dream quality? His thoughts were woven through and through with it at this moment. A voice at his inner ear, a voice curiously like Hy's, was murmuring over and over: "Sure! Kiss her."

"Don't you see?" cried Zanin, confronting him, and spreading out those big hands. Peter wished wildly that he would keep them in his pockets, put

them behind his back—anything to get them out of sight! . . . "Let's be sensible, Mann. As you said, we're business men, you and I. You let me take the scenario. I'm to see Sue this evening—I'll read it to her. I'm sure it's good. It'll reassure her. And it will help me to hold her enthusiasm and pave the way for a better understanding between her and you."

Quite unforeseen by either, the little matter of reading the scenario had struck up an issue between them. All was not harmony within the directorate of The Nature Film Producing Co., Inc., Jacob Zanin, Pres't.

"No," said Peter. "I won't let you have it now."

"But—good lord!—"

"I will think it over." Magnificent was the word.

Zanin gulped down a temperamental explosion and left.

Peter, as he came slowly back from the elevator to the apartment, discovered that he still held the poker tightly in his right hand, like a sword. He thought again of Napoleon and Henry V.

He stood motionless, by the window, staring out; moved by the histrionic emotionalism that was almost his soul to stiffen his shoulders like a king's. Out there—beyond old Washington Square where

the first buds of spring tipped the trees—beyond the glimpse, down a red-brick vista of the Sixth Avenue Elevated—still beyond and on, were, he knew, the dusty wandering streets, the crumbling houses with pasts, the flimsy apartment buildings decorated in front with rococo fire escapes, the bleak little three-cornered parks, the devastating subway excavations of Greenwich Village. Somewhere in that welter of poverty and art, at this very moment (unless she had walked up-town) was Sue Wilde. He tried to imagine just where. Perhaps in the dim little rear apartment she shared with Betty Deane, waiting for Zanin.

His gaze wandered down to the Square. There was Zanin, crossing it, under the bare trees.

His grip on the poker relaxed. He moved toward the telephone; glanced out again at the swift-striding Zanin; then with dignity, replaced the poker by the fireplace, consulted the telephone book and called up Sue's apartment.

Sue herself answered.

"This is Eric Mann," he told her. "I want very much to talk with you"—his voice was none too steady—"about the scenario."

"Well"—over the wire he could feel her hesitation—"if it is important. . . ."

"I think it is."

"Any time, almost, then . . ."

"Are you busy now?"

"Why—no."

"Perhaps you'd dine with me."

"Why—all right. At Jim's, say."

The color came rushing to Peter's face.

"Right away?" he suggested, controlling his voice.

"All right. I'll meet you there."

Peter hung up the receiver and smiled. So Zanin was to see Sue this evening, was he? "He'll need a telescope," mused Peter with savage joy as he hurried out.

CHAPTER XI

PROPINQUITY-PLUS

HE caught up with her at the corner nearest Jim's—the same Sue he had first met, here in the Village, on a curbstone, eating an apple—wearing her old tam o'shanter; good shoulders, no hips, well-shaped hands and feet; odd, honest deep-green eyes.

She was a wreck from endless rehearsing she told him smilingly and ordered a big English chop and a bigger baked potato. These were good at Jim's. She ate them like a hungry boy.

He offered her with inner hesitation, a cigarette. She shook her head. "Zanin won't let me," she explained. "He says it's going to be a big hard job, coming right on top of all the work at the Crossroads, and I must keep fit."

Zanin! Zanin! . . . But Peter maintained his studied calm. "I've got the scenario in my pocket,"

he announced. "I want to read it to you. And if you don't mind I'll tell you just why I want to."

"Of course I don't mind," said she, with just one half-covert glance. "Tell me."

"Please hear me out," said he.

Her lids did droop a little now. This was the Eric Mann whose plays she had seen in past years and who had pounced on her so suddenly with a crazy avowal of love. . . . A man she hardly knew!

He spoke quietly now and patiently; even with dignity.

"We—you and Zanin and I—are starting a serious job."

"Yes, I know."

"Well, I began all wrong by taking a personal attitude toward you, and we quarreled rather absurdly . . ."

"We won't speak of that," said she.

"Only to this extent: Any little personal misunderstandings—well, we've got to be businesslike and frank. . . . I'll tell you. This afternoon—just now, in fact—when I suggested to Zanin that I read it to the two of you, he objected. In fact he told me in so many words that you disliked me and didn't trust my understanding and that it would be

necessary for him to act as a buffer between you and me."

"Oh," said she quickly, "that's absurd, of course!"

"Of course. He rather insisted on taking the scenario and reading it to you himself. Now that won't do."

"I don't care who reads it to me," said Sue coolly.

"Certainly not. Now, if you'll agree with me that there's nothing personal between us, that we're just whole-hearted workmen on a job, I . . ."

She raised her eyebrows a little, waiting.

". . . I came here with the idea of asking you to hunt Zanin up with me—making it a matter of company business, right now."

"Oh," said she, her independent spirit stirred, "I don't see that that's necessary. Why don't you go ahead—just read it to me?" She looked about the smoky busy room. "But it's noisy here. And people you know come in and want to talk. I'd ask you around to the rooms, only . . ."

"Only, Hy Lowe will be there." Peter, feeling new ground under his feet, smiled.

Sue smiled a little herself.

"How about your place?" she asked them.

The question took Peter's breath. She said it in unmistakable good faith, like a man. But never,

never, in Peter's whole adult life, had a woman said such a thing to him. That women came occasionally into the old bachelor apartment building, he knew. But the implications! What would Hamerton, across the hall, think of him were he to meet them together in the elevator? What would John the night man think? Above all (this thought came second) what would they think of Sue?

"Oh," observed Sue, with real good humor, "I remember! That's the building where women callers can't stay after eleven at night."

Peter nearly succeeded in fighting back the flush that came.

"Which," Sue continued, "has always seemed to me the final comment on conventional morality. It's the best bit of perfectly unconscious humor in New York."

Peter was thinking—in flashes and leaps, like Napoleon—startled by his own daring, yet athrill with new determination. The Worm was out of town; Hy very much engaged. . . . Besides, Sue was honest and right. This was the sincere note in the New Russianism. Being yourself, straight-out. He must rise to it, now or never, if he was not to lose Sue for good.

So he smiled. "It's only eight," he said. "I can

read you the whole thing and we can discuss it within a couple of hours. And we won't be interrupted there."

Walking straight into that building with Sue at his side, nodding with his usual casual friendliness to John the night man, chatting while the elevator crawled endlessly upward to the seventh floor, overcoming the impulse to run past the doors of the other apartments, carrying it all off with easy sophistication; this was unquestionably the bravest single act in the whole life of Peter Ericson Mann.

Peter could be a pleasant host. He lighted the old gas-burning student lamp on the desk; started a fire; threw all the cushions in one large pile on the couch.

Sue threw aside her coat and tam o'shanter, smoothed her hair a little, then curled up on the couch with her feet under her where she could watch the fire; and where (as it happened) the firelight played softly on her alert face. She filled the dingy old room with a new and very human warmth.

Peter settled back in the Morris chair and after one long look at her plunged with a sudden fever of energy into the reading of the scenario.

It was the thing Peter did best. He read rapidly; moved forward in his chair and gestured now

and then for emphasis with his long hands; threw more than a little sense of movement and power into it.

Sue listened rather idly at first; then, as Peter's trained, nicely modulated voice swept on, lifted her head, leaned forward, watched his face. Peter felt her gaze but dared not return it. Once he stopped, flushed and hoarse, and telephoned down for ice-water. Those eyes, all alight, followed him as he rushed past her to the door and returned with the clinking water pitcher. He snatched up the manuscript and finished it—nearly half an hour of it—standing. Then he threw it on the desk with a noise that made Sue jump, and himself strode to the fireplace and stood there, mopping his face, still avoiding her eyes. She was still leaning eagerly forward.

"Well," said he now, with a rather weak effort at casualness, "what do you think of it? Of course it's a rough draft—"

"Of course it is no such thing," said she.

She got up; moved to the table; took up the manuscript and turned the first pages. Then she came to the other side of the hearth with it.

"What I want to know is—How did you do it?"

"Oh, it's Zanin's ideas, of course; but they needed rearranging and pointing up."

"This isn't a rearrangement," said she; and now he awoke to consciousness of the suppressed stirring quality in her voice, a quality he had not heard in it before. "It isn't a rearrangement. It's a created thing."

"Oh," he cried, "you really think that!"

"It carries the big idea. It's the very spirit of freedom. It's a—a sort of battle-cry—" She gave a little laugh—"Of course it isn't that, exactly; it's really a big vital drama. I'm talking rather wildly. But—" She confronted him; he looked past her hair at the wall. She stamped her foot. "Don't make me go on saying these inane things, please! You know as well as I do what you've done."

"What have I done?"

"You've stated our faith with a force and a fineness that Zanin, even, could never get. You've said it all for us. . . . Oh, I owe you an apology! Zanin told you part of the truth. I didn't dream—from your plays and things you have said—that you could do this."

Peter looked at her now with breathless solemnity.

"I've changed," he said.

"Something has happened."

"I'm not ashamed of changing."

She smiled.

"Or of growing, even."

"Of course not," said she. "But listen! You don't know what you've done. Do you suppose I've been looking forward to this job—making myself sensationally conspicuous, working with commercial-minded people? Oh, how I've dreaded that side of it! And worrying all the time because the scenario wasn't good. It just wasn't. It wasn't real people, feeling and living; it was ideas—nothing but ideas—stalking around. That's Zanin, of course. He's a big man. He has got the ideas, but he hasn't got *people,* quite; he just doesn't understand women. . . . Don't you see," she threw out her hands—"the only reason, the only excuse, really, for going through with this ordeal is to help make people everywhere understand Truth. And I've known—it's been discouraging—that we couldn't possibly do that unless it was clearly expressed for us. . . . Now do you see what you've done? It's *that!* And it's pretty exciting."

"Zanin may not take it this way."

"Oh, he will! He'll have to. It means so much to him. That man has lost everything at the Crossroads, you know. And now he is staking all he has left—his intelligence, his strength, his courage, on this. It means literally everything to him."

Peter stared at her. "And what do you suppose it means to me!"

"Why—I don't know, of course. . . ."

Peter strode to the desk, unlocked the middle drawer next the wall, drew out the six little bank books, and almost threw them into her lap.

"Look at those," he said—"all of them!"

"Why—" she hesitated.

"Go through them, please! Add them up."

Half smiling, she did so. Then said: "It seems to come to almost seven thousand dollars."

"That's the money that's going to work out your dream."

She glanced up at him, then down at the books.

"It's all I've got in the world—all—all! That, and the three per cent. it brings in. My play—they're going to produce it in the fall. You won't like it. It's the old ideas, the old Broadway stuff."

"But you've changed."

"Yes. Since I wrote it. It doesn't matter. It may bring money, it may not. Likely not. Ninety per cent. of 'em fail, you know. This is all I've got —every cent. All my energy and what courage I've got goes after it—into The Nature Film Producing Company. Please understand that! I'm leading up to something."

She looked a thought disturbed. He rushed on.

"Zanin's got it into his head that he's going to take you south to do all the outdoor scenes."

"I haven't agreed to that. He feels that it's necessary."

"Yes, he does. He's sincere enough. Remember, I'm talking impersonally. As I told you, we've got to be businesslike—and frank. We've got to!"

"Of course," said she.

"I'm beginning to see that Zanin is just as much of a hero with other people's money as he is with his own."

"That goes with the temperament, I suppose."

"Undoubtedly. But now, see! That trip south—taking actors and camera man and outfit—staying around at hotels—railway fares—it will cost a fortune."

"Oh," said she, very grave, "I hadn't realized that."

"If we can just keep our heads—more carefully—spend the money where it will really show on the film—don't you see, we can swing it, and when we've done it, it won't belong to the Interstellar people—or to Silverstone; it'll be ours. And that means it'll be what we—you—want it to be and not something vulgar and—and nasty. The other way, if

we give Zanin his head and begin spending money magnificently, we'll run out, and then the price of a little more money, if we can get it at all, will be the control."

He reached down for the books, threw them back into the drawer, slammed it and locked it.

"Yes," he said, "that's all I've got. I pledge it all, here and now, to the dream you've dreamed. All I ask is, keep in mind what may happen when it's gone."

She rose now; stood thinking; then drew on her tam o'shanter and reached for her coat.

"Let me think this over," she said soberly.

"We must be businesslike," said he. "Impersonal."

"Yes," said she, and stepped over to the fire, low-burning now with a mass of red coals.

Peter's eyes, deep, gloomy behind the big glasses, followed her. He came slowly and stood by her.

"I must go," she said gently. "It'll be eleven first thing we know. It would be a bit too amusing to be put out."

They lingered.

Then Peter found himself lifting his arms. He tried to keep them down, but up, up they came—very slowly, he thought.

He caught her shoulders, swung her around, drew her close. It seemed to him afterward, during one of the thousand efforts he made to construct a mental picture of the scene, that she must have been resisting him and that he must have been using his strength; but if this was so it made no difference. Her head was in the hollow of his arm. He bent down, drew her head up, kissed, as it happened, her nose; forced her face about and at the second effort kissed her lips. If she was struggling—and Peter will never be quite clear on that point—she was unable to resist him. He kissed her again. And then again. A triumphant fury was upon him.

But suddenly it passed. He almost pushed her away from him; left her standing, limp and breathless, by the mantel, while he threw himself on the couch and plunged his face into his hands.

"You'll hate me," he groaned. "You won't ever speak to me again. You'll think I'm that sort of man, and you'll be right in thinking so. What's worse, you'll believe I thought you were the sort to let me do it. And all the time I love you more than— Oh God, what made me do it! What could I have been thinking of! I was mad!"

Then the room was still.

CHAPTER XII

THE MOMENT AFTER

PETER tried to think. He could not lie there indefinitely with his face in his hands. But he couldn't think. His mind had stopped running. . . . At last he must face her. He remembered Napoleon. Slowly he lifted his head; got up.

She had seated herself on an arm of the Morris chair, taken off her tam o'shanter and was running her fingers through her rumpled short hair. She did not look at him. After a moment she put the tam o'shanter on again, but did not instantly get up; instead, reached out and drew the manuscript toward her.

Peter stood over the fire.

"Is it any good saying I'm sorry," he began . . .

"Please don't talk about it," said she.

There was a long silence. Peter, helpless, tried and tried to think. . . . Hy had brought him to this. In his heart he cursed Hy.

"I've been thinking," said Sue, fingering the man-

uscript; then suddenly turning and facing him—"you and I can't do this sort of thing."

"Oh, of course not," he cried eagerly.

"If there's going to be emotional tension between us, why—it's going to be hard to do the work." She took the manuscript up now and looked thoughtfully from page to page. "As I see the situation—if I see it at all—it's like this: You have solved our problem. Splendidly. There's our play. Like the rest of us, you are giving all you have. We've got to work hard. More, we've got to cooperate, very finely and earnestly. But we've got to be impersonal, businesslike. We've simply *got* to."

"I know it," said he ruefully.

"So, if our wires—yours and mine—are going to get crossed like—like this, well, you and I just mustn't see each other, that's all."

"Of course," said he.

"It's too bad. When you were reading the scenario, and I saw what power and life you have put into it, I thought it would be particularly interesting to have you coach me. You could help me so. But it is something, at least—" she threw out her arms again with the gesture that he was sure he would associate with her as long as he lived—as he

would remember the picture she made, seated there on an arm of the Morris chair, in his rooms. . . .

His rooms! How often in his plays had he based his big scene on Her visit to His Rooms! And how very, very different all those scenes had been from this. He was bewildered, trying to follow her extraordinarily calm survey of the situation.

She was talking on. "—it is something at least to know that you have been able to do this for us."

She slipped off the arm of the chair now and stood before him—flushed, but calm enough—and extended her hand.

"The best way, I think," she said, "is for you not to see much of me just now. That won't interfere with work at rehearsals, of course. If there's something you want to tell me about the part, you can drop me a line or call me up."

Peter took her hand, clasped it for a moment, let it fall.

She moved deliberately to the door. He followed her.

"But—" said Peter huskily—"but, wouldn't I better walk home with you?"

"No," said she, momentarily compressing her lips. "No! Better not! The time to start being businesslike is right now. Don't you see?"

"Yes," he murmured. "You are right, of course."

The telephone bell rang.

"Just a moment," said Peter.

And Sue waited, by the door.

Peter took up the receiver. She heard him stammer—

"Oh—oh, all right—eleven o'clock—all right."

"There," said she, laughing a little. "It has happened, you see! I'm being put out."

"I'm awfully sorry, Sue."

"Oh, that doesn't matter! It's just amusing."

"But I wouldn't have had it happen—"

His voice trailed off.

"Good night," said she again.

"Good night, Sue. You are treating me better than I deserve."

"We won't talk any more about it. Good night."

She tried to turn the catch on the lock. He reached out to help. His hand closed over hers. He turned; his eyes met hers; he took her in his arms again.

They moved slowly back toward the fire.

"Peter—please!" she murmured. "It won't do."

"Oh, Sue—Sue!" he groaned. "If we feel this way, why not marry and make a good job of it?"

Peter said this as she might have said it—all directness, matter-of-fact. "I wouldn't stop you, Sue. I wouldn't ever dominate you or take you for granted. I'd live for you, Sue."

"I know." She caught her breath and moved away from him. "You wouldn't stop me, but marriage and life would. No, Peter; not now. Marriage isn't on my calendar. . . . And, Peter, please don't make love to me. I don't want you to."

Peter moved away, too, at this.

"Look here, Sue," he said, after a moment's thought, rather roughly, "you go. We won't shake hands again. Just go. Right now. I promise I won't bother you. And we—we'll put the play through—put it through right."

Her eyes were on his again, with a light in them.

A slow smile was coming to the corners of her mouth.

"Oh, Peter," she said very gently, "don't you—when you say that—you make me—"

"Please—please go!" cried Peter.

The telephone rang.

"I'll think over the matter of the trip south," said she, "and—"

"Sue, I want you to go!"

"—and let you know. I'm not sure but what you're right. If we *can* do it up here . . ."

"Good God, Sue! Please! Please!"

She moved slowly toward the door, turned the catch herself, then glanced hesitatingly back.

Peter was standing rigidly before the fire, staring into it. He had picked up the poker and was holding it stiffly in his right hand.

She did not know that the man standing there was not Peter at all, but a very famous personage, shorter than Peter, and stouter, whose name had rung resoundingly down the slope of a hundred years.

He would not turn. So she went out.

CHAPTER XIII

TWO GIRLS OF THE VILLAGE

IT is not a simple matter to record in any detail the violent emotional reaction through which Peter now passed. Peter had the gift of creative imagination, the egotism to drive it far, and, for background, the character of a theatrical chameleon. Of these qualities, I have always believed that the egotism predominated. He could appear dignified, even distinguished; he could also appear excitable, ungoverned. Either would be Peter.

Nothing that had happened hitherto in his life had excited him as had the events of this evening. The excitement was, indeed, greater than he could bear. It set his imagination blazing, and there was among Peter's intricate emotional processes no hose of common sense adequate to the task of subduing the flames. He stood, breathless, quivering, at the window, looking out over the dim Square, exulting to the point of nervous exhaustion. He walked the floor. He laughed aloud. Finally, his spirit went on around the emotional circle through a high point

of crazy happiness to an equally crazy despondency. More time passed. The despondency deepened. She had made stipulations. He was not to see her again. If it should be necessary to communicate, he was to write. She had been kind about it, but that was what she had said. Yes, she had been kind, but her reaction would come as his had. She would hate him. Necessarily. Hy was to that extent right.

He sat on the couch (where she had sat), held the paper in shaking hands and stared wildly into the dying fire. Thoughts, pictures, were now racing through his mind, in a mad tangle, hopelessly confused. One notion he laid hold of as it went by . . . She had been his guest—here in his rooms. She had trusted herself with him. He had violated the trust. If he permitted a man to do such a thing in one of his plays, it would be for the purpose of exhibiting that man as a cad at least —probably as a villain. The inference was clear. Any audience that Peter was capable of mentally projecting would instantly, automatically, accept him as such. Peter himself knew no other attitude. And now to find himself guilty of this very act brought the final bewilderment.

So he, Peter, was a cad at least—perhaps a villain.

And then, at the lowest ebb of his reaction, his imagination set to work building up grotesque plans for a new different life. All these plans were out of the conventional stuff of his plays; all were theatrical. They had to do with self-effacement and sacrifice, with expiation, with true nobility. There was a moment when he considered self-destruction. If you think this wholly fantastic, I can only say that it was Peter. Another notion was of turning explorer, becoming a world's rough hand, of meeting hardship and privation. He pictured himself writing Sue manly letters, once a year, say. He would live then in her memory not as a cad or villain, but (perhaps) as a man who had been broken by a great love. Then, in reminiscent moments, as when she saw a log fire burning low, she would think tenderly of him. She might even sigh. . . . And he tried to think out acceptable devices for leaving his money in her hands. For he must see the Nature Film through.

He had just finished deciding this when Hy Lowe came.

Had Peter been less preoccupied, he would have noted that Hy was unusually silent. As it was, conscious only that the atmosphere of magical melancholy had been shattered when the door opened,

Peter undressed, put out the gas lamp and went to bed, his bed being the very couch on which she had curled up while he read the scenario. He knew that sleep would be impossible, but he felt that he should make every possible effort to control himself. Hy was fussing about in the bedroom.

After a while—a long while—he heard Hy come tiptoeing into the room and stand motionless.

"What the devil do you want!" cried Peter, starting up, all nerves.

"Just wanted to make sure you weren't asleep." And Hy chuckled breathlessly.

"Quit your cackling! What do you want?"

"Let me sit down, Pete. Damn it. I've got to talk—to somebody. Pete, I'm crazy. I'm delirious. Never mind what I say. Oh, my boy. My boy, you don't know—you can't imagine! . . . She's the darling of the gods, Peter! The absolute darling of the absolute gods!"

"Is that any reason why you should come driveling all over my room at this time of night?"

"Wait, Pete—serious now. You've got to stand by me in this. The way I've stood by you once or twice. To-day was Friday, wasn't it? Or am I crazy?"

"Both."

"Then it's to-morrow! I'm just trying to believe it, Pete, that's all."

"Believe *what?*"

"Look here—you've got to know, and protect me if any unexpected thing should come up. We're going on a little trip, Peter." Hy was solemn now, but his voice was uncertain. "Betty and I, Pete. To-morrow. On the night boat."

Peter was silent. Hy stood there for what seemed rather a long time, then suddenly bolted back into the bedroom. In the morning he was less expansive, merely asking Peter to respect his confidence. Which request Peter gloomily resented as he resented Hy's luck. The fortunate young man then packed a hand-bag and hurried off to breakfast at the club.

Peter tried to work on an empty stomach, but the effort gave him a headache, so he made himself a cup of coffee.

He walked the streets for a while with increasing restlessness; then, to soothe his nerves, went to the club and listlessly read the magazines. At noon he avoided his friends, but managed to eat a small luncheon. At two o'clock he went out aimlessly and entered the nearest moving-picture theater. At five he wandered back to the club and furtively asked

the telephone boy if there had been any messages for him. There had not.

He permitted himself to be drawn into a riotous game of Kelly pool. Also he permitted himself a drink or two.

During the evening, I regret to note, he got himself rather drunk and went home in a taxicab. This was unusual with Peter and not successful. It intensified his self-consciousness and his sorrow, made him even gloomier. But it did help him to sleep.

He was awakened, just before nine o'clock on Sunday morning, by the banging of a door. Then Hy, dusty, bedraggled, haggard of face, rushed in and stared at him.

Peter decided it was a dream and rolled over.

Hy shook him. "For God's sake, Pete!" he cried. How hoarse he was! "Where is she? Have you heard anything?"

Peter was coming awake.

"God, Pete, I'm crazy! Don't you understand—She wasn't on the boat. Must have got the wrong one. Oh, it's awful! . . . I walked that deck nearly all night—got off way up the river and came back to New York with the milk cans. Something terrible may have happened."

Peter sat up.

"It seems to me," he said, rubbing his tousled head, "that I remember something—last night—"

Hy waited, panting.

"Look on the desk. Didn't I bring up a note or something and lay it there?"

Hy was on the desk like a panther. There was a note. He tore it open, then thrust it into Peter's hands, crying hoarsely, "Read it!"—and dropped, a limp, dirt-streaked wreck of a man, into the Morris chair.

This was the note:

"Henry, I'm not going. I hope this reaches you in time. Please understand—forgive if you can. You won't see me again. B."

Peter read it again, thoughtfully; then looked up. His own none-too-clear eyes met Hy's distinctly bloodshot ones.

"And what do you think of that!" cried Hy. "What do you think of that! . . . Damn women, anyway! They don't play the game. They're not square." . . . He was clenching and unclenching his hands. Suddenly he reached for the telephone.

But just as his hand closed on it, the bell rang.

Hy snatched up the receiver. "Yes!" he cried

shortly—"Yes! Yes! He lives here. Wait a moment, please. It's for you, Pete."

Peter sprang out of bed and hurried to the instrument.

"Yes," said he, "this is Mr. Mann."

"Peter, it's Sue—Sue Wilde."

"Oh—hello! I was going to call up myself in a few minutes. How have you been?"

"Not awfully fit. This constant rehearsing seems to be on my nerves, or something."

There was a pause. Hy went off into the bedroom to get out of his travel-stained clothes.

"I wanted to say, Peter—I've been thinking it all over—"

Peter braced himself.

"—and I've come to the conclusion that you are right about that southern trip. It really isn't necessary."

"I'm glad you feel that way."

"I do. And we must make Zanin see it as we do."

"We'll try."

Another pause. Then this from Peter—

"Busy to-day?"

"I ought to be. Are you?"

"No. Can't work. Wish we could do something."

"I'd like some air—to get away from the streets and that stuffy theater. What could we do?"

"I'll tell you what you need, child—just the thing! We'll run down to one of the beaches and tramp. Pick up lunch anywhere. What do you say?"

"I'll do it, Peter. Call for me, will you? . . . And oh, Peter, here's an odd thing! Betty packed up yesterday while I was out and went home. Just left a note. She has run away—given up. Going to marry a man in her town. He makes gas engines."

Peter started the coffee machine, smiling as he worked. A sense of deep utter calm was flowing into his harassed spirit, pervading it.

He went into the bedroom and gazed with tolerant concern at the downcast Hy.

"The trouble with you, my boy," he began, then paused.

"What's the trouble with me?" growled Hy.

"The trouble with you, my boy, is that you don't understand women."

CHAPTER XIV

THE WORM TURNS FROM BOOKS TO LIFE

THE Worm worked hard all of this particular day at the Public Library, up at Forty-second Street and Fifth Avenue. At five o'clock he came out, paused on the vast incline of marble steps to consider the spraying fountains of pale green foliage on the terraces (it was late April) and the brilliant thronging avenue and decided not to ride down to Washington Square on an autobus, but to save the ten cents and walk. Which is how he came to meet Sue Wilde.

She was moving slowly along with the stream of pedestrians, her old coat open, her big tam o'shanter hanging down behind her head and framing her face in color. The face itself, usually vital, was pale.

She turned and walked with him. She was loafing, she said listlessly, watching the crowds and trying to think. And she added: "It helps."

"Helps?"

"Just feeling them crowding around—I don't know; it seems to keep you from forgetting that everybody else has problems."

Then she closed her lips on this bit of self-revelation. They walked a little way in silence.

"Listen!" said she. "What are you doing?"

"Half an hour's work at home clearing up my notes, then nothing. Thinking of dinner?"

She nodded.

"I'll meet you. Wherever you say."

"At the Muscovy, then. By seven."

She stopped as if to turn away, hesitated, lingered, gazing out with sober eyes at the confusion of limousines, touring cars and taxis that rolled endlessly by, with here and there a high green bus lumbering above all the traffic. "Maybe we can have another of our talks, Henry," she said. "I hope so. I need it—or something."

"Sue," said he, "you're working too hard."

She considered this, shook her head, turned abruptly away.

When he reached the old bachelor rookery in the Square he did not enter, but walked twice around the block, thinking about Sue. It had disturbed him to see that tired look in her odd deep-green eyes. Sue had been vivid, striking, straightforward; fired

with a finely honest revolt against the sham life into an observance of which nearly all of us, soon or late, get beaten down. He didn't want to see Sue beaten down like the rest.

It was pleasant that she, too, had felt deeply about their friendship. This thought brought a thrill of the sort that had to be put down quickly; for nothing could have been plainer than that he stirred no thrill in Sue. No, he was not in the running there. He lived in books, the Worm; and he reflected with a rather unaccustomed touch of bitterness that books are pale things.

Peter, now—he had seemed lately to be in the running.

But it hardly seemed that Peter could be the one who had brought problems into Sue's life. . . . Jacob Zanin—there was another story! He was in the running decidedly. In that odd frank way of hers, Sue had given the Worm glimpses of this relationship.

He rounded the block a third time—a fourth—a fifth.

When he entered the apartment Peter was there, in the studio, telephoning. To a girl, unquestionably. You could always tell.

"You aren't fair to me. You throw me aside without a word of explanation."

Thus Peter; his voice, pitched a little high, near to breaking with emotion; as if he were pleading with the one girl in the world—though, to be fair to Peter, she almost always was.

The Worm stepped into the bedroom, making as much noise as possible. But Peter talked on.

"Yes, you are taking exactly that position. As you know, I share your interest in freedom—but freedom without fairness or decent human consideration or even respect for one's word, comes down to selfish caprice. Yes, selfish caprice!"

The Worm picked up a chair and banged it against the door-post. But even this failed to stop Peter.

"Oh, no, my dear, of course I didn't mean that. I didn't know what I was saying. You can't imagine how I have looked forward to seeing you this evening. The thought of it has been with me all through this hard, hard day. I know my nerves are a wreck. I'm all out of tune. But everything seems to have landed on me at once. . . ."

Finding the chair useless as a warning, the Worm sat upon it, made a wry face, folded his arms.

". . . I've got to go away. You knew that,

dear. This was my last chance to see you for weeks —and yet you speak of seeing me any time. It hurts, little girl. It just plain hurts to be put off like that. It doesn't seem like us."

The Worm wondered, rather casually, to how many girls Peter had talked in this way during the past three years—stage girls, shop girls—the pretty little Irish one, from the glove counter up-town; and that young married person on the upper West Side of whom Peter had been unable to resist bragging a little; and Maria Tonifetti, manicurist at the sanitary barber shop of Marius; and—oh, yes, and Grace Derring. Only last year. The actress. She played Lena in Peter's *The Buzzard,* and later made a small sensation in *The Gold Heart.* That affair had looked, for several months, like the real thing. The Worm recalled one tragic night, all of which, until breakfast time, he had passed in that very studio talking Peter out of suicide.

He wondered who this new girl could be. Was it Sue, by any chance? Were they that far along?

The Worm got up with some impatience and went in there—just as Peter angrily slammed the receiver on its hook.

"I hear you're going away," the Worm observed dryly.

Peter swung around and peered through his big glasses. He made a visible effort to compose himself.

"Oh," he said, "hello! What's that? Yes, I'm leaving to-morrow afternoon. Neuerman is going to put *The Truffler* on the road for a few weeks this spring to try out the cast."

The Worm regarded him thoughtfully. "Look here, Pete," said he, "it isn't my fault that God gave me ears. I heard your little love scene."

Peter looked blankly at him; then his face twisted convulsively and he buried his face in his hands.

"Oh, Henry!" he groaned. "It's awful. I'm in love, man!" His voice was really trembling. "It's got me at last—the real thing. I must tell somebody—it's racking me to pieces—I can't work, can't sleep. It's Sue Wilde. I've asked her to marry me—she can't make up her mind. And now I've got to go away for weeks and leave things . . . Za-Zanin . . ."

He sat up, stiffened his shoulders, bit his lip. The Worm feared he was going to cry. But instead he sprang up, rushed from the room and, a moment later, from the apartment.

The Worm sat on a corner of the desk and looked after him, thought about him, let his feelings rise

a little. . . . Peter, even in his anger and confusion, had managed to look unruffled, well-groomed. He always did. No conceivable outburst of emotion could have made him forget to place his coat on the hanger and crease his trousers carefully in the frame. His various suits were well made. They fitted him. They represented thought and money. His shoes—eight or nine pairs in all—were custom made and looked it. His scarfs were of imported silk. His collars came from England and cost forty cents each. His walking sticks had distinction. . . . And Peter was successful with women. No doubt about that.

The Worm gazed down at himself. The old gray suit was a shapeless thing. The coat pockets bulged —note-book and wad of loose notes on one side, a paper-bound volume in the Russian tongue on the other. He had just one other suit. It hung from a hook in the closet, and he knew that it, too, was shapeless.

A clock, somewhere outside, struck seven.

He started; stuffed his note-book and papers into a drawer; drew the volume in Russian from his other pocket, made as if to lay it on the table, then hesitated. It was his custom to have some reading always by him. Sue might be late. She often was.

Suddenly he raised the book above his head and threw it against the wall at the other end of the room. Then he picked up his old soft hat (he never wore an overcoat) and rushed out.

The Muscovy is a basement restaurant near Washington Square. You get into it from the street by stumbling down a dark twisting flight of uneven steps and opening a door under a high stoop. Art dines here and Anarchism; Ideas sit cheek by jowl with the Senses.

Sue was not late. She sat in the far corner at one of the few small tables in the crowded room. Two men, a poet and a painter, lounged against the table and chatted with her languidly. She had brightened a little for them. There was a touch of color in her cheeks and some life in her eyes. The Worm noted this fact as he made his way toward her.

The poet and the painter wandered languidly away. The chatter of the crowded smoky room rose to its diurnal climax; passed it as by twos and threes the diners drifted out to the street or up-stairs to the dancing and reading-rooms of the Freewoman's Club; and then rapidly died to nothing.

Two belated couples strolled in, settled themselves sprawlingly at the long center table and discussed

with the offhand, blandly sophisticated air that is the Village manner the currently accepted psychology of sex.

The Worm was smoking now—his old brier pipe—and felt a bit more like his quietly whimsical self. Sue, however, was moody over her coffee.

A pasty-faced, very calm young man, with longish hair, came in and joined in the discussion at the center table.

Sue followed this person with troubled eyes.

"Listen, Henry!" she said then, "I'm wondering—"

He waited.

"—for the first time in two years—if I belong in Greenwich Village."

"I've asked myself the same question, Sue."

This remark perturbed her a little; as if it had not before occurred to her that other eyes were reading her. Then she rushed on—"Take Waters Coryell over there"—she indicated the pasty-faced one—"I used to think he was wonderful. But he's all words. Like the rest of us. He always carries that calm assumption of being above ordinary human limitations. He talks comradeship and the perfect freedom. But I've had a glimpse into his methods—Abbie Esterzell, you know—"

The Worm nodded.

"—and it isn't a pretty story. I've watched the women, too—the free lovers. Henry, they're tragic. When they get just a little older."

He nodded again. "But we were talking about you, Sue. You're not all words."

"Yes I am. All talk, theories, abstractions. It gets you, down here. You do it, like all the others. It's a sort of mental taint. Yet it has been every thing to me. I've believed it, heart and soul. It has been my religion."

"I'm not much on generalizing, Sue," observed the Worm, "but sometimes I have thought that there's a lot of bunk in this freedom theory—'self-realization,' 'the complete life,' so on. I notice that most of the men and women I really admire aren't worried about their liberty. Sometimes I've thought that there's a limit to our human capacity for freedom just as there's a limit to our capacity for food and drink and other pleasant things—sort of a natural boundary. The people that try to pass that boundary seem to detach themselves in some vital way from actual life. They get unreal—act queer—*are* queer. They reach a point where their pose is all they've got. As you say, it's a taint. It's a noble thing, all right, to fight and bleed and die

for freedom for others. But it seems to work out unhappily when people, men or women, insist too strongly on freedom for their individual selves."

But Sue apparently was not listening. Her cheeks —they were flushed—rested on her small fists.

"Henry," she said, "it's a pretty serious thing to lose your religion."

"Losing yours, Sue?"

"I'm afraid it's gone."

"You thought this little eddy of talk was real life?"

She nodded. "Oh, I did."

"And then you encountered reality?"

Her eyes, startled, vivid now if somber, flashed up at him. "Henry, how did you know? What do you know?"

"Not a thing, Sue. But I know you a little. And I've thought about you."

"Then," she said, her eyes down again, suppression in her voice—"then they aren't talking about me?"

"Not that I've heard, Sue. Though it would hardly come to me."

She bit her lip. "There you have it, Henry. With the ideas I've held and talked everywhere, I ought not to care what they say. But I do care."

"Of course. They all do."

"Do you think so?" She considered this. "You said something a moment ago that perhaps explains —about the natural boundary of human freedom. . . . Listen! You knew Betty Deane, the girl that roomed with me? Well, less than a year ago, after letting herself go some all the year—it's fair enough to say that, to you; she didn't cover her tracks—she suddenly ran off and married a manufacturer up in her home town. I'm sure there wasn't any love in it. I know it, from things she said and did. All the while he was after her she was having her good times here. I suppose she had reached the boundary. She married in a panic. She was having a little affair with your friend — what's his name?"

"Hy Lowe?"

The Worm smiled faintly. The incorrigible Hy had within the week set up a fresh attachment. This time it was a new girl in the Village—one Hilda Hansen, from Wisconsin, who designed wall-paper part of the time.

But he realized that Sue, with a deeper flush now and a look in her eyes that he did not like to see there, was speaking.

"When I found out what Betty had done I said

some savage things, Henry. Called her a coward. Oh, I was very superior—very sure of myself. And here's the grotesque irony of it." Her voice was unsteady. "Here's what one little unexpected contact with reality can do to the sort of scornful independent mind I had. Twenty-four hours—less than that—after Betty went I found myself soberly considering doing the same thing."

"Marrying?" The Worm's voice was suddenly low and a thought husky.

She nodded.

"A man you don't love?"

"I've had moments of thinking I loved him, hours of wondering how I could, possibly."

He was some time in getting out his next remark. It was, "You'd better wait."

She threw out her hands in an expressive way she had. "Wait? Yes, that's what I've told myself, Henry. But I've lost my old clear sense of things. My nerves aren't steady. I have queer reactions."

Then she closed her lips as she had once before on this day, up there on the avenue. She even seemed to compose herself. Waters Coryell came over from the other table and for a little time talked down to them from his attitude of self-perfection.

When he had gone the Worm said, to make talk, "How are the pictures coming on?"

Then he saw that he had touched the same tired nerve center. Her flush began to return.

"Not very well," she said; and thought for a moment, with knit brows and pursed lips.

She threw out her hands again. "They're quarreling, Henry."

"Zanin and Peter?"

She nodded. "It started over Zanin's publicity. He is a genius, you know. Any sort of effort that will help get the picture across looks legitimate to him."

"Of course," mused the Worm, trying to resume the modestly judicial habit of mind that had seemed lately to be leaving him, "I suppose, in a way, he is right. It is terribly hard to make a success of such an enterprise. It is like war — the only possible course is to win."

"I suppose so," said she, rather shortly. "But then there's the expense side of it. Zanin keeps getting the bit in his teeth. . . . Lately I've begun to see that these quarrels are just the surface. The real clash lies deeper. It's partly racial, I suppose, and partly—"

"Personal?"

"Yes." She threw out her hands. "They're fighting over me. I don't mind it so much in Peter. He has only lately come to see things our way. He never made the professions Zanin has of being superior to passions, jealousies, the sense of possession."

She paused, brooding, oblivious now to her surroundings, slowly shaking her head. "Zanin has always said that the one real wrong is to take or accept love where it isn't real enough to justify itself. But now when I won't see him—those are the times he runs wild with the business. Then Peter has to row with him to check the awful waste of money. Peter's rather wonderful about it. He never loses his courage."

This was a new picture of Peter. The Worm gave thought to it.

"First he took Zanin's disconnected abstractions and made a real film drama out of them. It's big stuff, Henry. Powerful and fine. And then he threw in every cent he had."

"Peter threw in every cent! . . ." The Worm was startled upright, pipe in hand.

"Every cent, Henry. All his savings. And never a grudging word. Not about that."

She dropped her chin on her hands. Tears were

in her eyes. Her boy-cut short hair had lately grown out a little, and was rumpled where she had run her fingers through it. It was fine-spun hair and thick on her head. It was all high lights and rich brown shades. The Worm found himself wishing it was long and free, rippling down over her shoulders. He thought, too, of the fine texture of her skin, just beneath the hair. A warm glow was creeping through his nervous system and into his mind. . . . He set his teeth hard on his pipe-stem.

She leaned back more relaxed and spoke in a quieter tone. "You know how I feel about things, Henry. I quit my home. I have put on record my own little protest against the conventional lies we are all fed on from the cradle here in America. I went into this picture thing with my eyes open, because it was what I believed in. It wasn't a pleasant thought—making myself so conspicuous, acting for the camera without clothes enough to keep me warm. I believed in Zanin, too. And it seemed to be a way in which I could really do something for him—after all he had done for me. But it hasn't turned out well. The ideals seem to have oozed out of it."

There she hesitated; thought a little; then added: "The thing I didn't realize was that I was pouring

out all my emotional energy. I had Zanin's example always before me. He never tires. He is iron. The Jews are, I think. But—I—" she tried to smile, without great success — "Well, I'm not iron. Henry, I'm tired."

The Worm slept badly that night.

The next morning, after Peter and Hy Lowe had gone, the Worm stood gloomily surveying his books —between two and three hundred of them, filling the case of shelves between the front wall and the fireplace, packed in on end and sidewise and heaped haphazard on top.

Half a hundred volumes in calf and nearly as many in Morocco dated from a youthful period when bindings mattered. College years were represented by a shabby row — Eschuylus, Euripides, Aristophanes, Plato, Plutarch, Virgil and Horace. He had another Horace in immaculate tree calf. There was a group of early Italians; an imposing Dante; a Boccaccio, very rare, in a dated Florentine binding; a gleaning of French history, philosophy and *belles-lettres* from Phillippe de Comines and Villon, through Rabelais, Le Sage, Racine, Corneille and the others, to Bergson, Brieux, Rolland and Anatole France—with, of course, Flaubert, de Maupassant and a tattered series of *Les Trois Mous-*

quetaires in seven volumes; some modern German playwrights, Hauptmann and Schnitzler among them; Ibsen in two languages; Strindberg in English; Gogol, Tchekov, Gorky, Dostoievski, of the Russians (in that tongue); the modern psychologists—Forel, Havelock Ellis, Freud—and the complete works of William James in assorted shapes and bindings, gathered painstakingly through the years. Walt Whitman was there, Percy's *Reliques,* much of Galsworthy, Wells and Conrad, *The Story of Gösta Berling,* John Masefield, and a number of other recent poets and novelists. All his earthly treasures were on those shelves; there, until now, had his heart been also.

He took from its shelf the rare old Boccaccio in the dated binding, tied a string around it, went down the corridor with it to the bathroom, filled the tub with cold water and tossed the book in.

It bobbed up to the surface and floated there.

He frowned—sat on the rim of the tub and watched it for ten minutes. It still floated.

He brought it back to the studio then and set to work methodically making up parcels of books, using all the newspapers he could find. Into each parcel went a weight—the two ends of the brass bookholder on the desk, a bronze elephant, a heavy glass

paper-weight, a pint bottle of ink, an old monkey-wrench, the two bricks from the fireplace that had served as andirons.

He worked in a fever of determination. By two o'clock that afternoon he had completed a series of trips across the West Side and over various ferry lines, and his entire library lay at the bottom of the North River.

From the last of these trips, feeling curiously light of heart, he returned to find a taxi waiting at the curb and in the studio Peter, hat, coat and one glove on, his suit-case on a chair, furiously writing a note.

Peter finished, leaned back, mopped his forehead.

"The books," he murmured, waving a vague hand toward the shelves. "Where are they?"

"I'm through with books. Going in for reality."

"Oh," mused the eminent playwright—"a girl."

"Pete, you're wonderful."

"Chucking your whole past life?"

"It's chucked." Then the Worm hesitated. For a moment his breath nearly failed him. He stood balancing on the brink of the unknown; and he knew he had to make the plunge. "Pete—I've got a few hundred stuck away—and, anyhow, I'm going out for a real job."

"A job! You! What kind?"

"Oh—newspaper man, maybe. I want the address—who is your tailor?"

Peter jotted it down. "By the way," he said, "here's our itinerary. Stick it in your pocket." Then he gazed at the Worm in a sort of solemn humor. "So the leopard is changing his spots," he mused.

"I don't know about that," replied the Worm, flushing, then reduced to a grin—as he pocketed the tailor's address—"but this particular Ethiop is sure going to make a stab at changing his skin."

CHAPTER XV

ZANIN MAKES HIMSELF FELT

SUE was in her half-furnished living-room—not curled comfortably on the couch-bed, as she would have been a month or two earlier, but sitting rather stiffly in a chair, a photograph in her listless hand.

Zanin—big, shaggy, sunburnt—walked the floor.

"Are you turning conventional, Sue?" he asked. "What is it? You puzzle me."

"I don't want that picture used, Jacob."

He lighted a cigarette, dropped on a wooden chair, tipped it back against the wall, twisted his feet around the front legs, drummed on the front of the seat with big fingers.

He reached for the photograph. It was Sue herself, as she would appear in one of the more daring scenes of Nature.

"It's an honest picture, Sue—right off the film."

She was very quiet. "It's the singling it out, Jacob. In the film it is all movement, action—it

passes. It doesn't stay before their eyes." A little feeling crept into her voice. "I agreed to do the film, Jacob. I'm doing it. Am I not?"

"But you're drawing a rather sharp line, Sue. We've got to hit them hard with this thing. I don't expect Mann to understand. I've got to work along with him as best I can and let it go at that. But I count on you." The legs of the chair came down with a bang. He sprang up and walked the floor again. His cigarette consumed, he lighted another with the butt, which latter he tossed into a corner of the room. Sue's eyes followed it there. She was still gazing at it when Zanin paused before her. She could feel him looking down at her. She wished it were possible to avoid discussion just now. There had been so many discussions during these crowded two years. . . . She raised her eyes. There were his, fixed on her. He was not tired. His right hand was plunged into his thick hair; his left hand held the cigarette.

"You're none too fit, Sue."

She moved her hands in assent.

"And that's something to be considered seriously. We need you fit."

She did not answer at once. She would have liked to send him away. She tried to recall the long slow

series of events, each dovetailed so intricately into the next that had brought them so close. Her mind —her sense of fairness—told her that he had every right to stand there and talk at her; yet he seemed suddenly and oddly a stranger.

"Suppose," she said, "we stop discussing me."

He shook his head. "It's quite time to begin discussing you. It's suppressions, Sue. You've played the Village game with your mind, but you've kept your feelings under. The result is natural enough —your nerves are in a knot. You must let go—trust your emotions."

"I trust my emotions enough," said she shortly.

He walked back and forth. "Let's look at this dispassionately, Sue. We can, you and I. Of course I love you — you know that. There have been women enough in my life, but none of them has stirred my blood as you have. Not one. I want you—desperately—every minute—month in, month out. But"—he stood before her again—"if you can't let go with me, I'd almost—surely, yes, I can say it, I'd rather it would be somebody else then. But somebody, something. You're all bottled up. It's dangerous."

She stirred restlessly.

"You know that as well as I." He was merciless.

The worst of it was he really seemed dispassionate. For the moment she could not question his sincerity. He went on—"As lately as last winter you would have carried all this off with a glorious flare. It's this suppression that has got to your nerves, as it was bound to. You're dodging, I'm afraid. You're refusing life." He lit another cigarette. "It's damn puzzling. At heart you are, I know, a thoroughbred. I can't imagine you marrying for a living or to escape love. You're intelligent—too intelligent for that." She moved restlessly, picked up the photograph and studied it again.

"You can't go back to that home of yours . . ."

"I'm not going back there," she said.

"And you can't quit. We're too deep in."

"Don't talk about that, Jacob!" she broke out. "I'm not going to quit."

He dropped casually on the arm of her chair. One big hand rested on the chair-back, the other took hers and held it, with the picture, a little higher.

She seemed for an instant to shrink away; then, with slightly compressed lips, sat motionless.

"You think I am squeamish," she said.

"Yes, I do." They both looked at the photograph.

"Really, Sue—why on earth! . . . What is it,

anyway? Are you all of a sudden ashamed of your body?"

"Don't expect me to explain. I know I'm inconsistent."

He pressed her hand; then his other big hand very quietly stroked her hair, slid down to her forehead, rested slightly on her flushed temple and cheek.

"You poor child," he said, "you're almost in a fever. You've got to do something. Don't you see that?"

She was silent.

"It's tearing you to pieces, this giving the lie to your own beliefs. You've got to let go, Sue! For God's sake, be human! Accept a little happiness. You're not a small person. You are gifted, big. But you've got to live the complete life. It's the only answer. . . . See here. Peter's away, isn't he?"

"He left last Thursday . . . I had a note . . ."

"I didn't," Zanin smiled grimly. "It's Tuesday, now. We can't do those outdoor scenes yet. You come away with me. I'll take you off into the hills somewhere—over in Pennsylvania or up-state. Let's have some happiness, Sue. And give me a chance to take a little real care of you. Half my strength is rusting right now because you won't use it."

He drew her closer.

Suddenly she sprang up, leaped across the room, whirled against the wall and faced him.

Then she faltered perceptibly, for on his face she saw only frank admiration.

"Fine, Sue!" he cried. "That's the old fire! Damn it, girl, don't let's be childish about this! You and I don't need to get all of a flutter at the thought of love. If I didn't stir an emotional response in you do you think I'd want you? But I do." He rose and came to her. He gripped her shoulders and made her look at him. "Child, for God's sake, don't all at once forget everything you know! Where's your humor? Can't you see that this is exactly what you've got to have—that somebody has got to stir you as I'm stirring you now! If I couldn't reach you, it would have to be some one else. A little love won't hurt you any. The real danger I've been fearing is that no man would be able to stir you. That would be the tragedy. You're a live vital girl. You're an artist. Of course you've got to have love. You'll never do real work without it. You'll never even grow up without it."

She could not meet his eyes. And she had a disheartening feeling that he was reasonable and right, granting the premises of their common philosophy.

He took his hands away. She heard him strike a match and light a cigarette, then move about the room. Then his voice—

"What do you say, Sue—will you pack a bag and start off with me? It'll do both of us good. It'll give us new life for our job."

She was shaking her head. "No," she said. "No."

"If it was only this," he said, thoughtfully enough —"but it's everything. Peter is lying down on me and now you are failing me utterly."

She dropped on a chair by the door. "That's the hardest thing you ever said to me, Jacob."

"It is true. I'm not blaming you. But it is a fact I have to meet. . . . Sue, do you think for one moment I intend being beaten in this enterprise? Don't you know me better than that? You are failing me. Not in love—that is personal. But in the work. Lately I have feared that Peter had your love. Now, Sue, if I am not to have you I can almost wish he had. When you do accept love it will hurt you. I have no doubt of that. There will be reactions. The conventional in you will stab and stab. But you are not little, and you will feel the triumph of it. It will make you. After all, however it may come, through door or window, love is life."

Will you pack a bag and start off with me?

She had folded her hands in her lap and was looking down at them. "I have no doubt you are right," she said slowly and quietly.

He gave a weary sigh. "Of course. Your own intelligence tells you. . . . If you won't go with me, Sue, I may slip away alone. I've got to think. I've got to get money. I can get it, and I will. A little more energy, a little more expenditure of personality will do it. It can always be done."

Her mind roused and seized on this as a momentary diversion. "Do you mean to go outside for it?"

"If it comes to that. Don't you know, Sue, that we're too far in with this thing to falter. The way to make money is to spend money. Peter's a chicken. If he won't come through, somebody's got to. Why it would cost more than a thousand dollars—perhaps two thousand — merely to do what I have planned to do with the picture you so suddenly dislike." He looked about for his hat. "I'm going, Sue. I've let myself get stirred up; and that, of course, is foolishness. I'm just tiring you out. You can't help, I see that—not as you are."

She rose and leaned against the wall by the door. He took her arm as he reached her side. "Buck up, little girl," he said; "don't blame yourself."

She did not answer, and for a long moment they stood thus. Then she heard him draw in his breath.

His arms were around her. He held her against him.

"Have you got a kiss for me, Sue?" he asked.

She shook her head.

He let her go then, and again she leaned against the wall.

"Good-by," said he. "If you could bring yourself to share the real thrill with me, I could help you. But I'm not going to wear you out with this crude sex-duel stuff. Good-by."

"Wait," she said then. She moved over to the table, and fingered the photograph. He stood in the doorway and watched her. She was thinking—desperately thinking. He could see that. The flush was still on her temples and cheeks. Finally she straightened up and faced him.

"Jacob," she said, "I can't let you go like that. This thing has got to be settled. Really settled."

He slowly nodded.

"Give me till Saturday, Jacob. I promise you I'll try to think it all out. I'll go through with the pictures anyway—somehow. As for this photograph, go ahead. Use it. Only please don't commit yourself in a money way before I see you. Come to

tea Saturday, at four. I'll either tell you finally that we are—well, hardly to be friends beyond the rest of this job of ours, or I'll—I'll go along with you, Jacob."

Her voice faltered over the last of this, but her eyes did not. And her chin was high.

"It's too bad," said he. "But you're right. It isn't me. You've come to the point where you've got to find yourself."

"That's it," she said. "I've got to try to find out what I am. If my thoughts and feelings have been misleading me—well, maybe I *am* conventional—maybe I *am* little—"

Her voice broke. Her eyes filled. But she fought the tears back and still faced him.

He took a step toward her. She shook her head.

He went out then.

And when the outer door shut she dropped limply on the couch-bed.

CHAPTER XVI

THE WORM PROPOSES MARRIAGE IN GENERAL

TWO days later, on Thursday, the Worm crossed the Square and Sixth Avenue and entered Greenwich Village proper.

He was dressed, at the top, in a soft gray hat from England. Next beneath was a collar that had cost him forty cents. The four-in-hand scarf was an imported foulard, of a flowering pattern in blues and greens; with a jade pin stuck in it. The new, perfectly fitting suit was of Donegal homespun and would cost, when the bill was paid, slightly more than sixty dollars. The shoes, if not custom made, were new. And he carried a slender stick with a curving silver head.

He felt uncomfortably conspicuous. His nerves tingled with an emotional disturbance that ignored his attempts to dismiss it as something beneath him. For the first time in nearly a decade he was about to propose marriage to a young woman. As he neared the street on which the young woman

lived, his steps slackened and his mouth became uncomfortably dry. . . . All this was absurd, of course. He and Sue were good friends. "There needn't be all this excitement," he told himself with a desperate clutching at the remnants of his sense of humor, "over suggesting to her that we change from a rational to an irrational relationship."

At the corner, however, he stopped dead. Then with a self-consciousness worthy of Peter himself, he covered his confusion by buying an afternoon paper and walking slowly back toward Sixth Avenue.

Suddenly, savagely, he crumpled the paper into a ball, threw it into the street, strode resolutely to Sue's apartment-house and rang her bell.

Sue promptly lighted the alcohol lamp under her kettle and they had tea. Over the cups, feeling coldly desperate, the Worm said:

"Been thinking you all over, Sue." It was a relief to find that his voice sounded fairly natural.

She took the remark rather lightly. "I'm not worth it, Henry. . . . I've thought some myself —your idea of the boundary. . . ."

His thoughts were moving on with disconcerting rapidity. He must take the plunge. It was his fate. He knew it.

"We talked marriage," he said.

She nodded.

"Since then I've tried to figure out what I do think, and crystallize it. Sue, I'm not so sure that Betty was wrong."

"That's a new slant," said she thoughtfully.

"Or very old. Just try to look through my eyes for a moment. Betty had tried freedom—had something of a fling at it. Now, it is evident that in her case it didn't work very well. Isn't it?"

"In her case, yes," Sue observed quietly.

"Precisely, in her case. She had reached the boundary. You'll admit that?"

Sue smiled faintly at his argumentative tone. "Yes, I'll admit it."

"Betty isn't a great soul. A stronger nature would have taken longer to reach the boundary. But doesn't it indicate that the boundary is there?"

"Well"—Sue hesitated. "All right. For the sake of the argument I'll admit that, too."

"Well, now, just what has Betty done? She doesn't love this manufacturer she has married."

"Not a bit."

"And the marriage may fail. The majority of them, from an idealistic point of view, undoubtedly do fail. Admitting all that, you have let me see

that you yourself in a weak moment have considered the same course."

Sue's brow clouded. But she nodded slowly.

"Well, then"—he hitched forward in his chair, and to cover his burning eagerness talked, if possible, a shade more stiffly and impersonally—"doesn't this, Betty's act and your momentary consideration of the same act, suggest that a sound instinct may be at work there?"

"If cowardice is an instinct, Henry."

"How do you know it is cowardice? From what data do you get that conclusion? Betty, after all her philandering, has undertaken a definite contract. It binds her. It is a job. There is discipline in it, a chance for service. It creates new conditions of life which will certainly change her unless she quits. Haven't you noticed, all your life, what a relief it is to get out of indecision into a definite course, even if it costs you something?"

Again that faint smile of hers. "Turning conservative, Henry?"

He ignored this. "Life moves on in epochs, Sue. If you don't start getting educated when you're a youngster, you go most awfully wrong. If you don't accept the discipline of work as soon as you've got a little education and grown up, you're a slacker

and before long you're very properly rated as a slacker. So with a woman—given this wonderful function of motherhood and the big emotional capacity that goes with it—if she waits too long after her body and spirit have ripened she goes wrong, emotionally and spiritually. There's a time with a normal woman when love and maternity are—well, the next thing. Not with every woman of course. But pretty certainly with the woman who reaches that time, refuses marriage, and then is forced to admit that her life isn't working out. Peter has coined the word for what that woman becomes —a better word than he himself knows . . . she's a truffler."

She was gazing at him. "Henry," she cried, "what has struck you? Where's that humorous balance of yours?"

"I'm in earnest, Sue."

"Yes, I see. But why on earth—"

"Because I want you to marry—"

It was at this moment that the Worm's small courage fled utterly out of his inexperienced heart. And his tongue, as if to play a saturnine trick on that heart, repeated the phrase, unexpectedly to what was left of his brain, with an emphatic downward emphasis that closed the discussion.

"I want you to marry," he said.

A sudden moisture came to Sue's eyes, and much of the old frankness as she surveyed him.

"Henry," she said then, "you are wonderful, coming at me like this, as if you cared—"

"I do care—"

"I know. I feel it. Just when I thought friends were—well . . . " She did not finish this, but sat erect, pushed her teacup aside and gazed at him with something of the old alertness in the green-brown eyes. There was sudden color in her cheeks. "Henry, you've roused me—just when I thought no one could. I've got to think. . . . You go away. You don't mind, do you? Just let me be alone. I've felt lately as if I was losing—my mind, my will, my perceptions—something. And, Henry—wait!" For he had risen, with a blank face, and was looking for his hat.

"Wait—did Peter leave you his itinerary?"

The Worm felt in his pockets and produced it.

"He sent me one, but I tore it up." She laughed a little, then colored with a nervous suddenness; and walked after him to the door. "You've always had the faculty of rousing me, Henry, and steadying me. To-day you've stirred me more than you could possibly know. I don't know what will come of it

—I'm dreadfully confused—but I can at least try to think it out."

That was all—all but a few commonplace phrases at the door.

"Oh," said he, with a touch of awkwardness, "I meant to tell you that I've made a change myself."

"You?" Again her eyes, recalled to him, ran over his new clothes.

"I start work to-morrow, on *The Evening Courier.*"

"Oh, Henry, I'm glad. Good luck! It ought to be interesting."

"At least," said he heavily, "it will be a slight contact with reality;" and hurried away.

CHAPTER XVII

ENTER GRACE DERRING

"THE TRUFFLER" opened at Albany. Before ten o'clock of that first evening even the author knew that something was wrong with the second act.

The company wandered across New York State into Pennsylvania; Peter, by day and night, rewriting that unhappy act. The famous producer, Max Neuerman, fat but tireless, called endless rehearsals. There was hot coffee at one A. M., more hot coffee at five A. M., but it was never so hot as the scalding tears of the leading lady, Miss Trevelyan, who couldn't, to save her, make Peter's lines come real.

There were, also, dingy Eagle Houses and Hotel Lincolns where soggy food was hurled at you in thick dishes by strong-armed waitresses.

Finally, Neuerman himself dictated a new scene

that proved worse than any of Peter's. The publicity man submitted a new second-act curtain. The stage manager said that you couldn't blame Miss Trevelyan; she was an emotional actress, and should not be asked to convey the restraint of ironic comedy —in which belief he rewrote the act himself.

By this time, the second act had lost whatever threads of connecting interest it may have had with the first and third; so Neuerman suggested that Peter do those over. Peter began this—locked up over Sunday in a hotel room.

Then Neuerman made this announcement:

"Well—got one more string to my bow. Trevelyan can't do your play, and she's not good enough to swing it on personality. We're going to try some one that can."

"Who, for instance?" muttered Peter weakly.

"Grace Derring."

We have spoken of Grace Derring. It was not a year since that tumultuous affair had brought Peter to the brink of self-destruction. And that not because of any coldness between them. Not exactly. You see—well, life gets complicated at times. You are not to think harshly of Peter; for your city bachelor does *not* inhabit a vacuum. There have usually been—well, episodes. Nor are you to feel

surprise that Peter's face, in the space of a moment, assumed an appearance of something near helpless pain.

So Grace Derring was to be whirled back into his life—caught up out of the nowhere, just as his devotion to Sue had touched exalted heights!

The voice of the fat manager was humming in his ears.

"She made good for us in *The Buzzard.* Of course her work in *The Gold Heart* has put her price up. But she has the personality. I guess we've got to pay her."

Peter started to protest, quite blindly. Then, telling himself that he was too tired to think (which was true), he subsided.

"Can you get her?" he asked cautiously.

"She's due here at five-thirty."

Peter slipped away. Neuerman had acted without consulting him. It seemed to him that he should be angry. But he was merely dazed.

He walked the streets, a solitary, rather elegant figure, conspicuously a New Yorker, swinging his stick savagely and occasionally muttering to himself. He roved out to the open country. Maple buds were sprouting. New grass was pushing upward into the soft air. The robins were singing. But

there were neither buds nor robins in Peter's heart. He decided to be friendly with Grace, but reserved.

It was nearly six when he entered the barnlike office of the hotel, his eyes on the floor, full of himself. Then he saw her, registering at the desk.

He had stopped short. He could not very well turn and go out. She might see him. And he was not afraid.

She did see him. He raised his hat. Their hands met—he extremely dignified, she smiling a very little.

"Well, Peter!"

"You're looking well, Grace."

"Am I?"

They moved, tacitly, into the adjoining parlor and stood by the window.

"I thought—" he began.

"What did you think, Peter?" Then, before he could reply, she went on to say: "I've been working through the Middle West. Closed in Cincinnati last week."

"Had a hard season?"

"Hard—yes." She glanced down at a large envelope held under her arm. "Mr. Neuerman sent your play. I've just read it—on the train."

"Oh, you've read it?"

"Yes." Again that hint of a smile. Peter's eyes wandered about the room. "It's funny," she murmured.

"What's funny?" said he severely.

"I was thinking of this play." She took it out of the envelope and rapidly turned the typewritten pages. "So bachelor women are—what you call 'trufflers,' Peter!"

"It is quite impersonal, Grace."

"Oh, of course—a work of art—"

Not clear what that twisted little smile of hers meant, he kept silent.

"Oh, Peter!" she said then, and left him. Everything considered, he felt that he had handled it rather well.

This was Tuesday. It was arranged that Miss Derring should make her first appearance Thursday night. Meantime, she was to get up her part and watch the play closely with the idea of possible suggestions. Peter kept austerely aloof, working day and night on the revision of Acts I and III. Neuerman and Miss Derring consulted together a good deal. On Thursday, Peter caught them at the luncheon table, deep in a heap of scribbled sheets of paper that appeared to be in Grace's large hand.

They urged him to join them, but he shook his head. He did agree, however, to sit through the rehearsal, later in the afternoon.

Thus it was that he found himself seated next to Grace in one of the rear rows of a dim empty theater, all but lost in the shadows under the balcony. Neuerman left them, and hurried down to the stage to pull his jaded company together.

It seemed to Peter that they were very close, he and Grace, there in the shadow. He could feel her sleeve against his arm. He wished Neuerman would come back.

Unexpectedly to himself, Peter started nervously. His hat slipped from his knees. He caught it. His hand brushed Grace's skirt, then her hand. Slowly their fingers interlocked.

They sat there, minute after minute, without a sound, her fingers tight in his. Then, suddenly, he threw an arm about her shoulders and tried to kiss her. With a quick little rustle, she pressed him back.

"Don't," she whispered. "Not here."

So Peter leaned back and sat very still again, holding her hand down between the two seats.

Finally the rehearsal was over. They evaded the manager and walked. There was a river in this town, and a river road. Peter sought it. And out

there in the country, with buds and robins all about them and buds and robins in his heart, he kissed her. He knew that there had never been any woman in all the world but Grace, and told her so. All of his life except the hours he had spent with her faded into an unreal and remote dream.

Grace had something on her mind. But it was a long time before she could bring Peter to earth. Finally he bethought himself.

"My dear child," he said—they were strolling hand in hand—"here it is after seven! You've had no dinner—and you're going on to-night."

"Not to-night, Peter. Not until Monday."

"But—but—"

"Mr. Neuerman and I have been trying to explain what we were doing, but you wouldn't listen. Peter, I've made a lot of suggestions for the part. He asked me to. I want your approval, of course. I'm going to ask him to show you what I've done." But Peter heard only dimly. Near the hotel, she left him, saying, with a trace of anxiety: "I don't want to see you again, Peter, until you have read it. Look me up for lunch to-morrow, and tell me if you think I've hurt your play."

Neuerman came to him late that night with a freshly typed manuscript. He tried to read it, but

the buds and robins were still alive, the play a stale dead thing.

Friday morning, there was a letter for Peter, addressed in Sue's hand. The sight of it confused him, so that he put it in his pocket and did not open it until after his solitary breakfast. It had the effect of bringing Sue suddenly to life again in his heart without, at first, crowding Grace out.

"It's love that is the great thing," he thought, explaining the phenomenon to himself. "The object of it is an incident, after all. It may be this woman, or that—or both. But the creative artist must have love. It is his life."

Then he read Sue's letter; and pictures of her arose. It began to appear to him that Sue had inspired him as Grace never had. Perhaps it was Sue's youth. Grace, in her way, was as honest as Sue, but she was not so young. And the creative artist must have youth, too!

The letter was brief.

"Could you, by any chance, run back to New York Saturday—have tea with me? I want you here. Come about four."

But it fired his imagination. It was like Sue to reach out to him in that abrupt way, explaining nothing.

Then he settled down in his room, a glow in his heart, to find out just what Grace and Neuerman had done, between them, to *The Truffler*.

At noon that day a white Peter, lips trembling, very still and stiff, knocked at Miss Derring's door.

She opened it, just dressed for luncheon.

"Oh," she cried—"Peter!"

"Here," said he frigidly, "is the manuscript of your play."

Her eyes, very wide, searched his face.

"It is not mine. I wash my hands of it."

"Oh, Peter—please don't talk like this."

"You have chosen to enter into a conspiracy with Neuerman to wreck what little was left of my play. With Neuerman!" He emphasized the name. "I am through."

"But, Peter—be sensible. Come to lunch and we'll straighten this up in five minutes. Nothing is being forced on you. I was asked . . ."

"You were brought here without my knowledge. And now—this!"

He strode away, leaving the manuscript in her hands.

She stood there in the door, following him with bewildered eyes until he had disappeared around a turn in the hall.

Peter, feeling strongly (if vaguely) that he had sacrificed everything for a principle, packed his suitcase, caught a train to Pittsburgh, and later, a sleeper for New York.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE WORM CONSIDERS LOVE

ZANIN came in quietly, for him; matter of fact; dropped his hat on the couch; stood with his hands in his pockets and looked down at Sue who was filling her alcohol lamp.

"Well, Sue," said he, "it's Saturday at four. I've kept my part of the agreement. You haven't had a word from me. But"— and he did show feeling here—"you are not to think that it has been easy. We've talked like sensible people, you and I, but I'm not sensible." Still she bent over the lamp. "So you'd better tell me. Are we starting off together to-night?"

"Don't ask me now," she said.

"Oh, come, Sue. Now, really!"

She straightened up. "I'm not playing with you, Jacob. I promised to answer you to-day."

"Well—why don't you? Now. Why wait?"

"Because I don't know yet."

"But good God, Sue! If you don't know yet—"

She threw out her hands.

He dropped into a chair; studied her gloomily.

Then the bell rang and Peter came in. And Sue faced two grave silent men.

"First," she said, as briskly as she could, "we shall have tea."

This much accomplished and the biscuits distributed, she curled herself up on the couch. "Now," she said, "this has been a difficult week. And I can see only one thing to do. The Nature Film Company is in a bad way."

For the first time the two men looked squarely at each other. Sue, her color up, a snap in her eyes, suppressed a perverse impulse to laugh, and steadied herself.

"Here we are," she went on. "I've been worn out—no good for weeks. You men are fighting each other—oh, yes, you are!—and yet we three are the ones that have got to do it. Now, Jacob, you have hinted at new expenses, new money problems, to me. I want you to say it all to Peter. Every word. Wait, please! And, Peter, you have felt that Jacob was inclined to run wild. Say it to him." She wound up in a nervous little rush and stopped short as if a thought frightened—"And as for me, it's not a question of what I will or won't do. I'm afraid,

if we don't straighten things out, it's going to be a question what I shall be able to do. We must get all this—what do you say?—'on the carpet.' Please begin!"

She sank back, drew a long breath and watched them with eyes in which there was a curious nervous alertness.

More than Sue could have dreamed, it was a situation made to Peter's hand. Without a moment's warning she had called on him to play, in some small degree, the hero. She had given him the chance to be more of a hero than Zanin. His very soul glowed at the thought. Given an audience, Peter could be anything.

So it turned out that just as Zanin gave an odd little snort, caught squarely between impatience and pride, Peter turned on him and said, very simply:

"Sue is right, Zanin. We have been knifing each other. And I'm ashamed to say that I haven't even had the sense to see that it wasn't business." And he put out his hand.

Zanin hesitated a faint fraction of a second and took it.

Then Peter—sure now that he knew how the late J. P. Morgan must have felt about things, full of still wonder at himself and touched by the wistful

thought that had he chosen differently in youth he might easily have become a master of men—hit on the compromise of giving full play to Zanin's genius for publicity, provided Zanin, for his part, submitted to a budget system of expenditure.

"And a pretty small budget, too," he added. "We've got to do it with brains, Zanin, as you did things at the Crossroads."

This settled, however, a silence fell. Each of the three knew that nothing had been settled. Sue, that quiet light in her eyes, watched them.

Then suddenly, with her extraordinary lightness of body, she sprang to her feet. Peter, all nerves, gave a start. Zanin merely followed her with eyes —heavy puzzled eyes.

Sue picked up the tea kettle. "One of you—Peter—bring the tray!" she commanded as she went out into the dark kitchenette.

Peter, with a leap almost like Sue's, followed. He could not see clearly out there, but he thought she was smiling as she set down the kettle.

"Sue," he whispered, still in the glow of his quiet heroism, "I knew I loved you, but never before today did I realize how much." No one could have uttered the words with simpler dignity.

She stood motionless, bending over the kettle.

"Something has happened to-day," she said very low.

"Sue—nothing serious! . . ."

She raised her head now. She *was* smiling. "How much do you want me, Peter?"

"I can only offer you my life, Sue, dear."

"Supposing—what if—I—were—to accept it?"

She slipped away from his outstretched arms then, and back to the living-room. Peter, in a wordless ecstasy, followed.

"Jacob," she said, without faltering. "I want you to congratulate me. Peter and I are going to"—she gave a little excited laugh now—"to try marriage."

The Worm wandered into the Muscovy for dinner.

Sue and Peter caught him there just as he was paying his check.

"Peter," she said, not caring who might hear—"we owe a lot to Henry. Perhaps everything. In that dreadful mood I wouldn't have listened to reason from any one else—never in the world."

"You Worm," Peter chuckled. "Looks like a little liquid refreshment."

So the Worm had to drink with them, but con-

viviality was not in his heart. He raised his glass; looked over it, grimly, at Peter. "I drink," he said, "to Captain Miles Standish."

Peter let it go as one of Henry Bates' quaint whimsies.

But Sue looked puzzled. And the Worm, suddenly contrite, got away and walked the streets, carrying with him a poignantly vivid picture of a fresh girlish face with high color and vivid green-brown eyes.

After a while he tried going home, weakly wishing he might find something to read; instead he found Hy Lowe and an extremely good-looking girl with mussed hair. They fairly leaped apart as he came stumbling in.

"We're trying a new step," panted Hy quite wildly. "Oh, yes, this is Miss Hilda Hansen—Henry Bates."

The Worm liked the way she blushed. But he suddenly and deeply hated Hy.

The Worm went out and sat on a bench in the Square. He was still sitting there when the moon came up over the half-clothed trees.

Little Italians from the dark streets to the southward played about the broad walks. Busses rumbled by on the central drive. A policeman passed.

Full-breasted girls arm in arm with swarthy youthful escorts strolled past. One couple sat on his bench and kissed. He got up hurriedly.

At last, rather late he stood, a lonely figure under the marble arch, gazing downward at his shoes, his stick, his well made, neatly pressed trousers. He took off his new hat and stared at it.

The policeman, passing, paused to take him in, then satisfied as to his harmlessness, moved on.

"Busy day, to-morrow," the Worm told himself irrelevantly. "Better turn in."

He saw another moon-touched couple approaching. He kept out of their sight. The man was Hy Lowe, dapper but earnest, clutching the arm of his very new Miss Hansen, bending close over her.

The Worm watched until he lost them in the shadows of Waverley Place. Next, as if there were some connection, he stared down again at his own smart costume.

"Love," he informed himself, "is an inflammation of the ego."

Then he went home and to bed.

CHAPTER XIX

BUSINESS INTERVENES

THE Worm met Sue Wilde one afternoon as she stepped down from a Seventh Avenue car —carried it off with a quite successful air of easy surprise. He couldn't see that it harmed Peter or anybody, for him to meet her now and then. If it gave him pleasure just to see her walk—even in a middy blouse, old skirt and sneakers, she was graceful as a Grecian youth!—to speak and then listen to her voice as she answered, to glimpse her profile and sense the tint of health on her olive skin, whose business was it! So long as he was asking nothing! Besides, Sue didn't dream. He didn't intend that she should dream. He had lied to her with shy delight regarding his set habit of walking every afternoon. He hated walks—hated all forms of exercise. He knew pretty accurately when she would be through her day's work at the plant of the Interstellar Film Company, over in Jersey, because they

were doing outside locations now, and outdoor work, even in April, needs light. He knew precisely what trains she could catch; had, right now, a local time table in a convenient pocket. Sue was an outdoor girl and would prefer ferry to tube. From the ferry it was car or sidewalk; either way she couldn't escape him unless she headed elsewhere than toward her dingy little apartment.

To-day he walked home with her.

She suggested tea. He let his eyes dwell on her an instant—she on the top step, he just below—and in that instant he forgot Peter. "All right," said he, a pleasant glow in his breast, "if you'll have dinner with me. They have a fresh lot of those deep-sea oysters at Jim's."

Then he caught her hesitation and recalled Peter. For a moment they stood in silence, then: "Don't let's trade," she said. "Come in for tea anyway."

He followed her in, reflecting. Peter or no Peter, it disturbed him to see this restraint in Sue Wilde. He felt that it disturbed her a little, too. It was possible, of course, that this was one of the evenings when Peter expected to appropriate her. The Worm was the least obtrusive of men, but he could be stubborn. Then and there he asked if this was Peter's evening.

She was stooping to unlock the apartment door. "No," she replied rather shortly, "he's working tonight."

They had hardly got into the apartment before the bell rang, and Sue went out to answer it. The Worm, sandy of hair, mild of feature, dropped into the willow armchair, rested elbows on knees, surveyed the half-furnished living-room and smiled.

In a mason jar on the mantel, next to a hit-or-miss row of Russian novels, Havelock Ellis's *Sex in Relation to Society, Freud on Dreams and Psychanalysis,* and two volumes of Schnitzler's plays, blazed a large cluster of jonquils. At the other end of the mantel, drooping over the rim of a green water pitcher, were dusty yellow roses, full blown, half their petals scattered on books, mantel and hearth, their scent heavy in his nostrils. A tin wash basin, on the mission table by the wall, was packed, smothered, with pansies—buff, yellow, orange, purple, velvet black. A bunch of violets surmounted an old sugar bowl that shared with cigarette boxes, matches and an ash receiver, the tabouret by the couch-bed. But what widened the Worm's faint smile into a forthright grin, square and huge on the table, towering over the pansies, was a newly opened five-pound box of sweets.

Sue came in, smiling herself, with a hint of the rueful, bearing before her a long parcel with square ends.

"I'll bet it's roses," observed the Worm.

She tore off the paper, opened the box with quick fingers—it *was* roses—deep red ones.

She took a chocolate, nibbled it; then stepped back, laughing a little and threw out her hands. "Henry," she cried, "what on earth am I to do with him! I've hinted. And I've begged. I'm afraid I'll hurt him—"

"You would go and get engaged to him, Sue. And I must say he plays the rôle with all his might." After which remark, the Worm produced, scraped, filled and lighted his pipe.

"I'll start the water," said Sue; then instead, stood gazing at the flowers. "It's so—Victorian!"

The Worm grinned cheerfully. "Peter isn't so easy to classify as that."

"I know." She reached for another chocolate. "He isn't Victorian."

"Not all the time, certainly. And not all over. Just in spots."

Her color deepened slightly. "You've never read the scenario he did for us, Henry. Nothing Victorian about that. There's a ring to it—and power.

Nobody who misses the modern spirit *could* have written it. Not possibly. It's the real battle cry of woman's freedom. And a blow for honesty! It is when I think of that—how the pictures are to be shown in every city and every village, all over this country—reaching people that the books never reach and touching their emotions, yes, their hearts where feminist speakers and such just antagonize them—"

The sentence died out in mid-air. Sue, a flash in her deep-green eyes, stared out the window at the old red brick walls that surrounded the score of fenced-in little back yards, walls pierced with hundreds of other rear windows and burdened with cluttered fire-escapes, walls hidden here and there by high-hung lines of washing.

She spoke again. "Don't you see, Henry, that's what makes this miserable business worth while, that's what justifies it—all this posing before those camera people, working with hired actors that don't for a moment know what it's all about and don't understand my being in it or my relations with Peter or the friendly feeling I have for Zanin—it's getting so I have to fight it out with myself all over again every morning to get through it at all. But when I'm almost hopelessly stale all I have to do is come home here and shut the door and curl up on

the couch and read the thing as Peter wrote it—it brings the vision back, Henry!—and then I think of him staking all his savings to make it a success—Oh, I know that's personal, just for me . . ."

Sue was having some trouble with sentences today. This one didn't get finished either. She stood there brooding; started another one: "Henry, Zanin couldn't do it—with all his intelligence and drive—it took Peter to phrase Zanin's own ideas and then add the real quality to them and form and human feeling—Zanin is cold, an intellectualist, not an artist . . ." Suddenly she broke out with this—"Of course this marriage means a long series of adjustments. Do you suppose I don't know that? Doesn't every marriage?"

The Worm was silent; smoking slowly and watching her. He was thinking very soberly. "Whom among women the gods would destroy they first make honest."

Sue felt his gaze and raised her chin with a little jerk; tried to smile; finally caught up the box of roses and buried her face in them.

"Peter oughtn't to spend the money," she cried, not unhumorously, "but it is dear of him. Every time I come into the room the flowers sing to me."

"After all," said he, helping her out, "it's a relief,

in these parts, to see some one taking marriage seriously. Date set yet?"

She nodded.

"Not telling?"

She shook her head.

"Soon?"

She nodded. "That's all. No more questions."

"Religious ceremony?"

"Hardly, Henry." She was a thought grim about this.

"You can be as rationalistic as you like," said he, musing, "but marriage *is* a fairy story. Like the old-fashioned Christmas with tree and candles and red bells—yes, and Santa Claus. You can't rationalize love, and you can't casualize it. Not without debasing it. Love isn't rational. It is exclusive, exacting, mysterious. It isn't even wholly selfish." His tone lightened. "All of which is highly heterodox, here on Tenth Street."

She smiled faintly and busied herself over the teakettle.

"I'm glad to see that Zanin keeps friendly, Sue."

She sobered, and said: "There, it's boiling."

The bell sounded again—two short rings, a pause, one long ring.

She started, bit her lip. "That's Zanin now," she

said. "He hasn't been here since—" She moved toward the door, then hesitated. "I wish you would—"

She bit her lip again, then suddenly went. He heard the door open and heard her saying: "Henry Bates is here. Come in."

Zanin entered the room, and the Worm quietly considered him. The man had a vision. And he had power—unhindered by the inhibitions of the Anglo-Saxon conscience, undisciplined by the Latin instinct for form, self-freed from the grim shackles of his own ancestry. He wore a wrinkled suit, cotton shirt with rolling collar, his old gray sweater in lieu of waistcoat.

He drank three cups of tea, chatted restively, drummed with big fingers on the chair-arm and finally looked at his watch.

The Worm knocked the ashes from his pipe and considered. Just what did Sue wish he would do? No use glancing at her for further orders, for now she was avoiding his glances. He decided to leave.

Out on the sidewalk he stood for a moment hesitating between a sizable mess of those deep-sea bivalves at Jim's oyster bar and wandering back across Sixth Avenue and Washington Square to the rooms. It wasn't dinner time; but every hour is an

hour with oysters, and Jim's was only a step. But then he knew that he didn't want to eat them alone. For one moment of pleasant self-forgetfulness he had pictured Sue sitting on the other side of the oysters. They went with Sue to-night, were dedicated to her. He considered this thought, becoming rather severe with himself, called it childish sentimentality; but he didn't go to Jim's. He went to the rooms.

When he had gone Zanin hitched forward in his chair and fixed his eyes on Sue over his teacup.

"What is it, Jacob?" she asked, not facing him.

He wasted no words. "You know something of our business arrangements, Sue—Peter's and mine."

She nodded.

"There's a complication. When we formed The Nature Film Company we had, as assets, my ideas and energy and Peter's money and theatrical experience. And we had you, of course. You were vital —I built the whole idea around your personality."

"Yes, I know," she broke in with a touch of impatience.

"Peter stood ready to put in not more than four to five thousand dollars. That was his outside figure. He told me that it was nearly all he had—and anyway that he is living on his capital."

"I know all that," said she.

"Very good!" He put down his teacup and spread his hands in a sweeping gesture. "Now for the rest of it. Of course we had no organization or equipment, so we made the deal with the Interstellar people. They took a third interest. They supply studio, properties, camera men, the use of their New Jersey place and actors and hand us a bill every week. Naturally since we got to work with all our people on the outside locations, the bills have been heavy—last week and this—especially this. Before we get through they'll be heavier." He drew a folded paper from his pocket; spread it out with a slap of a big hand; gave it to her.

"Why, Jacob," she faltered and caught her breath. "Eight hundred and—"

He nodded. "It's running into regular money. And here we are! Peter has put in three thousand already."

"Three thousand!"

"More—about thirty-two hundred."

"But, Jacob, at this rate—"

"What will the whole thing cost? My present estimate is twelve to fifteen thousand."

Sue flushed with something near anger. "This is new, Jacob! You said three or four thousand."

He shrugged his shoulders. His face was impassive.

"It was as new to me as to you. The situation is growing. We must grow with it. We've got a big idea. It has all our ideals in it, and it's going to be a practical success, besides. It's going to get across, Sue. We'll all make money. Real money. It'll seem queer."

Sue, eyes wide, was searching that mask of a face.

"But here's the difficulty. Peter isn't strong enough to swing it. Within another week we'll be past his limit—and we can't stop. *He* can't stop. Don't you see?"

She was pressing her hands against her temples. "Yes," she replied, in a daze, "I see."

"Well, now." He found a cigarette on the tabouret; lighted it, squared around. "The Interstellar people aren't fools. They know we're stuck. They've made us an offer."

"For the control?"

He nodded. "For the control, yes. But they leave us an interest. They'd have to or pay us good big salaries. You see, they're in, too. It means some sacrifice for us, but—oh, well, after all, it means that the Nature Film has a value. They'll finance it and undertake the distribution. There's

where we might have come a cropper anyway—the distribution. I've just begun to see that. You keep learning."

She was trying to think. Even succeeding after a little.

"Jacob," she said, very quiet, "why do you bring this to me?"

He spread his hands. "This is business, now. I'll be brutal."

She nodded, lips compressed.

"You and Peter—you're to be married, the minute we get the picture done, I suppose."

"But that—"

He waved at the flowers, stared grimly at the huge box of candy. "Peter's an engaged man, an idiot. He's living in 1880. I'm the man who offered you love with freedom. Don't you realize that the time has come when Peter and I can't talk. It's the truth, Sue. You know it. You're the only human link between us. Therefore, I'm talking to you." He waited for her to reply; then as she was still, added this quite dispassionately: "Better watch Peter, Sue. He's not standing up very well under the strain. I don't believe he's used to taking chances. Of course, when a nervous cautious man does decide to plunge—"

She interrupted him. "I take it you're planning to go ahead, regardless, Jacob."

"Of course." He shrugged his shoulders. "I've told you—we can't stop. Peter least of all. It's pure luck to us that the Interstellar folks can't stop either."

"You mean—if they could—we'd . . ."

"Fail? Certainly. Smash."

Sue felt his strength; found herself admiring him, as she had admired him in the past—coldly, with her mind only.

"I will not go to him as your messenger," she said, again partly angry.

"All right—if you won't! Call him—" He waved toward the telephone. "Is he home now?"

She nodded.

"It's a partnership for him—a good offer—responsible people. See here, Sue, you must be made to grasp this. We're going straight on. Got to! The problem is to make Peter understand—the shape he's in, frightened to death . . . he won't listen to me. . . . It's up to you, Sue. It's a job to be handled. I'm trying to tell you. One way or another, it's got to be broken to him tonight. We've got precious little time to give him for his nervous upset before he comes around."

Sue looked at him. Her hands were folded in her lap.

"Well—?" said he.

"Jacob, you shouldn't have come to me."

"You won't even call him?"

"No."

"May I?"

"Of course."

He got up, moved toward the telephone, hesitated midway, changed his mind and picked up his hat. Holding it between his hands he stood over her. She waited. But instead of speaking, he went out.

She sat there a brief time, thinking; went over to the telephone herself; even fingered the receiver; gave it up; busied herself hunting a receptacle for Peter's roses, finally settling on an earthenware crock.

CHAPTER XX

PETER GETS A NOTE

THE Worm walked slowly and thoughtfully across to Washington Square and the old brick apartment building.

Peter was there—a gloomily intense figure, bent over the desk at the farther end of the nearly dark studio, his long face, the three little pasteboard bank books before him, the pad on which he was figuring and his thin hands illuminated in the yellow circle from the drop light on the desk. Just behind him on the small table was his typewriter, and there were sheets of paper scattered on the floor. He lifted his face, peered at the Worm through his large glasses, then with nervous quickness threw the bank books into a drawer which he locked. He tore up the top sheet of the pad; noted pencil indentations on the sheet next under it, and tore that up too.

"Hello!" he remarked listlessly.

"Hello!" replied the Worm. Adding with a

touch of self-consciousness: "Just had a cup of tea with Sue."

"Over at her place?"

The Worm nodded.

"Any—any one else there?"

"Zanin came in."

Peter winced and whitened a little about the mouth; then suddenly got up and with an exaggerated air of casualness set about picking up the papers on the floor. This done he strode to the window and stared out over the Square where hundreds of electric lights twinkled. Suddenly he swung around.

"It's a strain," he said in a suppressed, clouded voice.

"Doubtless," murmured the Worm, reaching for the evening paper.

"Zanin used to try to—to make love to her."

Some effort must be made to stem this mounting current. "Oh, well," said the Worm, rather hurriedly, "you're free from worry, Pete."

"God—if I were!" muttered the eminent modernist.

"But you are! Good lord, man, here I've just asked her to have dinner with me, and she ducked. Wouldn't even eat with me."

"But—"

"But nothing! It was flatly because she is engaged to you."

Peter thought this over and brightened. "But see here!" he cried—"I'm not a Turk. I'm not trying to lock her up."

The Worm was silent.

Peter confronted him; spoke with vehemence. "Sue is free—absolutely. I want her to be free. I wouldn't have it otherwise. Not for a moment. It's absurd that she should hesitate about dining with you, or—or"—this with less assurance—"with any man."

Peter walked around the room, stopping again before the Worm who was now sitting on the desk, looking over the evening paper.

"Oh, come now!" said Peter. "Put up that paper. Listen to me. Here you are, one of my oldest friends, and you make me out a Victorian monster with the woman I love. Damn it, man, you ought to know me better! And you ought to know Sue better. If her ideas are modern and free, mine are, if anything, freer. Yes, they are! In a sense—in a sense—I go farther than she does. She is marrying me because it is the thing she wants to do. That's

the only possible basis on which I would accept her love. If that love ever dies" . . . Peter was suddenly all eloquence and heroism. Self-convinced, all afire, he stood there with upraised arm. And the Worm, rather fascinated, let his paper drop and watched the man . . . "If that love ever dies," the impressive voice rang on, "no matter what the circumstances, engaged, married, it absolutely does not matter, Sue is free. Good God! You should know better—you, of all people! You know me—do you suppose I would fasten on Sue, on that adorable, inspired girl, the shackles of an old-fashioned property marriage! Do you suppose I would have the hardihood to impose trammels on that free spirit!"

Carried away by his own climax Peter whirled, snatched up the desk telephone, called Sue's number, waited tense as a statue for the first sound of her voice, then said, instantly assuming the caressingly gentle voice of the perfect lover: "Sue, dear, hello! How are you? Tired? Oh, I'm sorry. Better get out somewhere. Wish I could come, but a job's a job. I'll stick it out. Wait though! Here's Henry Bates with nothing to do. I'm going to send him over to take you out—make you eat something and

then walk a bit. It's what you need, little girl. No, not a word! I'm going to ring off now. He'll come right over. Good-by, dear."

He put down the instrument, turned with an air of calm triumph. "All right," he said commandingly. "Run along. Take her to the Muscovy. I may possibly join you later but don't wait for me. I'll tell you right now, we're not going to have any more of this fool notion that Sue isn't free." With which he sat down at his typewriter and plunged into his work.

The Worm, taken aback, stared at him. Then, slowly, he smiled. He didn't care particularly about the Muscovy. It was too self-consciously "interesting"—too much like all the semi-amateur, short-lived little basement restaurants that succeed one another with some rapidity in the Greenwich Village section. The Worm was thinking again of Jim's exceedingly Anglo-Saxon chop house and of those salty deep-sea oysters, arrived this day. At the Muscovy you had Russian table-cloths and napkins. The tables were too small there, and set too close together. You couldn't talk. You couldn't think. He wondered if Peter hadn't chosen the place, thus arbitrarily, because Sue's friends would be there and would see her enacting this freedom of his.

Peter was now pecking with a rather extraordinary show of energy at the typewriter. The Worm, studying him, noted that his body was rigidly erect and his forehead beaded with sweat, and began to realize that the man was in a distinct state of nerves. It was no good talking to him—not now. So, meekly but not unhumorously obeying orders, the Worm set out.

Sue met him at her door with a demure smile.

"Where is it?" she asked—"Jim's?"

He shook his head. His face, the tone of his voice, were impenetrable. There was not so much as a glimmer of mischief in his quietly expressive eyes; though Sue, knowing Henry Bates, looked there for it. "No," he said, "we are to go to the Muscovy."

Peter, meanwhile, continued his frenzy of work for a quarter-hour; then slackened; finally stopped, sighed, ran his long fingers through his hair, and gloomy again, turned wearily around to the desk, unlocked his own particular drawer, brought out the three bank books and resumed his figuring on the pad. If you could have looked over his shoulder you would have seen that his pencil faltered; that he added one column, slowly and laboriously, six or seven times, getting a different result each time;

and that then, instead of keeping at it or even throwing the book back into the drawer, he fell to marking over the figures, shading the down strokes, elaborating the dollar signs, enclosing the whole column within a two-lined box and then placing carefully rounded dots in rows between the double lines. This done, he lowered his head and sighted, to see if the rows were straight. They were not satisfactory. He hunted through the top drawers and then on the bookcase for an eraser. . . .

There was a loud knock at the door.

He started, caught his breath, then sank back, limp and white, in his chair. At the third knocking he managed to get up and go to the door. It was a messenger boy with a note.

Peter held the envelope down in the little circle of yellow light on the desk. It was addressed in Zanin's loose scrawl. The handwriting definitely affected him. It seemed to touch a region of his nervous system that had been worn quiveringly raw of late. He tore the envelope open and unfolded the enclosure. There were two papers pinned together. The top paper was a bill from the Interstellar people for eight hundred and twenty dollars and fifty cents. The other was in Zanin's hand—penciled:

"It's getting beyond us, Mann. They offer to carry it through for a sixty per cent. interest. It's a good offer. We've got to take it. Come over to the Muscovy about eight, and I'll have copies of the contract they offer. Don't delay, or the work will stop to-morrow."

Peter carefully unpinned the two papers, laid them side by side on the desk, smoothed them with his hands. Doing this, he looked at his hands. The right one he raised, held it out, watched it. It trembled. He then experimented with the left. That trembled, too. He stood irresolute; opened the three savings bank books—spread them beside the papers; stared at the collection long and steadily until it began to exert a hypnotic effect on his unresponsive mind. He finally stopped this; stood up; stared at the wall. "Still," ran his thoughts, "I seem to be fairly calm. Perhaps as a creative artist, I shall gain something from the experience. I shall see how men act in utter catastrophe. Come to think of it, very few artists ever see a business failure at short range. This, of course, borders on tragedy. I am done for. But from the way I am taking this now I believe I shall continue to be calm. I must tell Sue, of course . . . it may make a difference. . . . I think I shall take one stiff drink. But no

more. Just the one. It will steady my nerves. And I won't look at those things any longer. After the drink I think I shall take a walk. And I shall be deliberate. I shall simply think it out, make my decision and abide by it."

CHAPTER XXI

OYSTERS AT JIM'S

SUE and the Worm had no more than seated themselves at the Muscovy when Zanin came briskly in, hat in hand—still in the wrinkled old suit, still wearing the gray sweater for a waistcoat—but keen of face, buoyant even. He threaded his way between the tables, nodding here and there in response to the cries of "Hello, Jacob!"—came straight to Sue, and, with a casual greeting for the Worm, bent over and claimed her ear.

"Sue," he said low; "I called up, then took a chance on finding you here. I've sent the bill to Peter. And I've told him of the break in our plans. The lawyer for the Interstellar people is coming with the new contract—meets me up-stairs in the club. I've told Peter to be here at eight. But I've got to know about you. Is there any danger that you won't go through—finish the pictures?"

"You mean—in case—"

He nodded. "If Peter and I smash up. Whatever happens. I can't see ahead myself. But the pictures are half done, and they're all you. It would be serious if you—"

Sue silenced him with a nervous glance about; compressed her lips; turned her fork over and over on the table; then slowly nodded. "I'll finish," she said very soberly.

"All right," he replied. "I knew you would, of course. But I had to ask. Things have changed so. . . . I'll be down later."

Sue watched him, still turning the fork with tense fingers, as he made his way to the door, paused for a word with one of the girl waitresses—an impoverished young writer and idealist, Jewish, rather pretty, who had played with them at the Crossroads—and finally disappeared in the hall, turning back toward the stairway that led up to the rooms of the Freewoman's Club.

The Worm was studying the menu. He waited until her eyes and her thoughts returned to the table, then looked up at her with a quiet grin. "How about food, Sue?" said he.

She gazed at him, collected her thoughts, looked down at the card. Then she made an effort to smile.

"Sorry, Henry—I've lost my appetite." She pressed the edge of the card against her pursed lips. "Henry, let's get out—go over to Jim's."

He shook his head. "We can't," he said. Then he saw her gaze narrow intently, over his shoulder —so intently that he turned.

Peter was standing in the doorway, peering about the room—a repressed, elaborately self-contained Peter. His mouth drooped at the corners. The lines that extended downward from his nose were deeper than usual, had something the appearance of being carved in a gray marble face.

Peter's gaze—he seemed to find it difficult to focus his eyes, was laborious about it—finally rested on their table. Slowly he got through the crowd, approaching them. He jostled one of the girl waiters; and turning, apologized with rather extraordinary formality. The girl glanced after him, curious.

The Worm looked around, perceived an unoccupied chair at a neighboring table, lifted it over the heads of his neighbors and set it down beside his own. Peter dropped into it, saying, "I'm sorry to disturb you two . . . something has come up."

The Worm found it rather uncomfortable. His first impulse was to withdraw and let Peter and Sue talk. But people were looking at them; there were

audible whispers; he decided to do nothing conspicuous. He sat back in his chair and studied the menu again. "I'll know the thing by heart pretty soon!" he thought.

Peter leaned forward, toward Sue. She was watching him calmly, the Worm thought; but she was a little flushed. There was no escaping the conversation that followed. Peter managed to keep his voice fairly low; but it was plain that he barely realized where he was. The whole engine of his mind—racing now at several thousand R. P. M.—was headed inward.

"We'll have to quit the pictures, Sue, dear. I can't tell you the whole story now—not here—but Zanin has absolutely broken faith. He has wrecked me . . . not that I mind that . . . it's the crookedness of the thing . . . the ideals he professed . . . he's sold us out, it's a dirty commercial scheme after all that he's dragged you into." . . . The inner pressures were evident now in Peter's voice. It was still low, but it shook and came out jerkily and huskily. He was stopping frequently to swallow.

Sue's fingers strayed toward the fork; turned it slowly. Her eyes followed her fingers. A waitress

came toward them, stood unnoticed and turned away, exchanging an amused glance with friends at the next table.

"It's a complete smash," Peter went on. "Any way you look at it, it's a smash. There's just that last step to take—we must get out."

"Please—" Sue murmured, "not here!"

"But, Sue—"

"Don't, Peter. We can talk later."

"But there's nothing to say." Now the Worm caught in his voice Peter's uncertainty of her. "Is there, Sue?"

She turned and turned the fork. Peter's eyes were fastened on her face, hungrily, abjectly. She slowly nodded.

"But, Sue, you and I—"

She drew a long breath, faced him. "I've got to finish the pictures, Peter."

"Sue, you can't—"

"I simply won't talk about this out here. But it would wreck Jacob if I stopped now."

It seemed to the Worm that Peter had to make a desperate effort to comprehend this. His brows were knit, his eyes wandering. Finally he said: "But, Sue, good God! You don't understand. Zanin has wrecked me."

"I'm not sure about that. If we finish the pictures. If we don't—yes."

Peter's hands gripped the edge of the table. "Sue—Zanin has been talking with you!"

"Please, Peter—not so loud!"

"Has he? Answer me!"

Slowly she nodded.

"Are you playing fair with me?"

"Oh, Peter—yes! I am."

"You are still engaged to be my wife?"

"Yes. Please, Peter. . . ."

"Then"—the moment Henry Bates had shrewdly, painfully waited as he watched the man, came now; the suppressions that had been struggling within Peter's breast broke bounds; his voice suddenly rang out—"then, I forbid you to go on!"

Sue paled; seemed to sink down a little in her chair; knit her brows; said nothing.

The room was very still. Even the Greenwich Village group was startled, hushed, by the queer sense of impending drama that filled the room.

During the long hush several girls went out, hurriedly. Others struggled unsuccessfully to make talk. One laughed.

Peter looked around with half-hearted defiance,

then dropped his eyes. "Evidently," he said, addressing the Worm with queer precise formality, "the thing for me to do is to go. I am not desired here." But he sat motionless.

It was at this point that Zanin came in. He saw Peter, crowded bruskly across the room, laid a legal appearing document on the table at Peter's elbow and said: "Look this over, Peter, and meet me up-stairs a little later. Their man is coming. They give us no choice—we must sign to-night."

Peter squared around at the first tones of the strong, slightly husky voice, drew in his chin, scowled. It appeared to the Worm that he was making a desperate effort to look dignified. But at the last words, Zanin dropped a large hand on Peter's shoulder. That was what made the trouble; or rather what set it off.

I have explained that the Muscovy occupied a basement. The ceiling was low. The tables—small ones around the walls and two longer ones across the center space with their chairs (common kitchen chairs, they were) filled the room except for an opening near the door. In the opening, at one side of the door, was the small table that served as a cashier's desk. It was covered with slips of paper

and little heaps of coin and some bank notes under an iron paper-weight. The whole in charge of a meek girl with big spectacles.

There were twenty-five or thirty persons in the room—mostly women and girls. Of the four or five men, two, in a party near the door, were painters with soft curling beards; the others, young anarchists and talkers, were seated over in the farther corner near one of the barred front windows.

A feature of the scene that Henry Bates will never forget was that Peter first rose, very deliberately, produced an eye-glass case from an inner pocket and carefully put his glasses away. Then he sprang at Zanin—apparently not striking cleanly with clenched fists but clawing and slapping, and shouting breathlessly. I suppose that in every man who has been a boy and a youth there is a strain of vulgarity, innate or acquired. It is exhibited when reason flees. Reason had certainly, at last, fled from Peter. For what he was shouting was this—over and over—"A Jew won't fight! A Jew won't fight!"

In the surprise of this first rush Zanin retreated, sparring ineffectually; backed into the corner of a table; crashed over it; went down with it to the floor amid broken dishes, steaming food and the

Zanin went down amid broken dishes, steaming food and the wreckage of a chair

wreckage of a chair. Two young women were thrown also. One of them screamed; the other appeared to be stunned, and the Worm somehow got to her, lifted her up and supported her out the service door to the kitchen.

When he returned the panic was on. Gasping and shrieking, various hitherto calm young women whom nothing in life could surprise, were fighting past one another for the door. But one young man, pasty-faced, longish hair—name of Waters Coryell—went through the struggling group like a thin tornado, tearing aside the women that blocked his way, symbolizing, in a magnificent burst of unself-conscious energy, the instinct of self-preservation, with a subconscious eye, doubtless to later achievements in self-expression. . . . The Worm saw his flight and smiled. He had heard Waters Coryell expound the doctrine that a man should do what he wants to do. "He wants to get out," mused the Worm.

Peter did not at once leap upon the fallen Zanin. He first cast about for a weapon. At Sue's elbow was a large water pitcher. He seized this and for a moment stood over his opponent, brandishing it and again shouting, "A Jew won't fight!" He was in this attitude when the Worm returned from the kitchen.

The room was nearly empty now. Over at the door, the meek little cashier with the big spectacles was calling out in a sharp small voice, "Pay your checks, please! Pay your checks!" And one girl, her eyes glassy with fright, automatically responding to the suggestion, was fumbling in her wrist bag, saying, "I don't seem to have the change."

The Worm hesitated for a moment between getting Sue out and trying to stop the fight. Sue had pushed back her chair a little way but was still sitting there.

At this moment Zanin, who was trying to draw himself away on his elbows to a point where he could get up in reasonable safety, saw an opportunity to trip Peter. Instantly he put the idea into effect. Peter went down. The water pitcher was shattered on the floor. The two men clinched and rolled over and over among the chairs and against the legs of another table.

The Worm turned to Sue. "You'd better get out," he said.

She was quite white. "I suppose," she managed to say, "I'm no use here."

"Not a bit."

He took her arm and steadied her until she was clear of the wreckage. Every one else had got out

now excepting the girl with the big spectacles. She stood flattened against the wall, apparently all but unable to breathe. As Sue Wilde passed, however, she gasped out, "Check, please!"

The Worm snorted, caught Sue's arm again and rushed her out and up the steps to the sidewalk. Out here most of those who had been in the basement stood about in groups. Others, street children and loungers, were appearing. The situation was ripening swiftly into a street crowd with its inevitable climax of police interference. "Move away!" said the Worm to Sue. "As far as the Square." And he spoke to others whom he knew. The crowd thinned. Then making a wry face in the dim light, the Worm headed back down the steps, muttering, "Physical prowess is not my specialty, but . . ."

He carefully shut the street door after him and turned the key. The little cashier was on the stairs now, crouching low against the wall. The Worm half listened for a "Check, please!" as he came down the corridor; but she was silent. There was, too, a suspicious silence in the dining-room. The Worm hurried to the door.

There, just within the door, stood Peter. His right coat sleeve had been ripped nearly off, at the shoulder seam, and hung down over his hand. He

was fumbling at it with the left hand, frantically trying, first to roll it back, then to tear it off. Zanin, over against the farther wall, was getting heavily to his feet. He paused only an instant, then charged straight at Peter.

One glance at the eminent playwright made it plain that his frenzy already was tempered with concern. He had made, it appeared, a vital miscalculation. This particular Jew *would* fight—was, apparently, only just beginning to fight. There was blood on Zanin's cheek, trickling slowly down from a cut just under the eye. His clothes, like Peter's, were covered with the dirt of the floor. His eyes were savage.

Peter again groped blindly for a weapon. His hand, ranging over the cashier's table, closed on the iron paper-weight. He threw it at the onrushing Zanin, missed his head by an inch; caught desperately at a neat little pile of silver quarters; threw these; then Zanin struck him.

The thing was no longer a comedy. Zanin, a turbulent hulk of a man, was roused and dangerous. The Worm caught his arm and shoulder, shouted at him, tried to wrench the two apart. Zanin threw him off with such force that his head struck hard against the wall. The Worm saw stars.

The fighters reeled, locked together, back into the dining-room, knocked over the cashier's table and fell on it. Zanin gave a groan of pain and closed his big hands on Peter's neck.

The Worm ran up the stairs. Three men were sitting, very quiet, in the reading-room of the Freewoman's Club. Waters Coryell dominated.

"For God's sake," said the Worm quietly, "come down!"

Waters Coryell, who professed anarchism, surveyed him coolly. "The thing to do," he replied, "obviously, is to telephone the police."

"Telephone your aunt!" said the Worm, and ran back down-stairs.

Peter and Zanin were still on the floor, at grips. But their strength seemed to have flagged. One fact, noted with relief, was that Zanin had not yet choked Peter to death. They were both purple of face; breathing hard; staring at each other. Some of Zanin's still trickling blood had transferred itself to Peter's face and mixed with the dirt there.

The Worm caught up a chair, swung it over his head and cried, in deadly earnest, "You two get up or I'll smash both your heads!"

They glared at each other for a moment. Then Zanin managed to catch enough breath to say—

"But the man's insane!"

Peter gulped. "I am not insane! Nothing of the kind!"

"Get up," commanded the Worm.

Very slowly, eying each other, they obeyed. Zanin brushed off his clothes as well as he could with his hands; then, for the first time conscious of the blood on his face, mopped at it with his handkerchief. Peter went off under the low-hanging center chandelier and examined with a pained expression, his ruined coat.

There were steps and voices on the stairs. She of the big spectacles appeared in the doorway.

"I beg your pardon," observed Peter with breathless formality, "but have you got a pin?"

She stared at him; then at Zanin, finally at the Worm.

"There's a gentleman up-stairs," she said mechanically in a lifeless voice.

The Worm went up. A businesslike young man was standing in the upper hall, looking about him with mild curiosity.

"Whom did you wish to see?" asked the Worm.

"Mr. Zanin and Mr. Mann."

"Oh—you must be the attorney for the Interstellar people."

"I am."

"Come this way," said the Worm with calm, and ushered him down the stairs and into the dining-room.

Sue was sitting alone on a bench in Washington Square. She saw Henry Bates approaching and rose hurriedly to meet him.

"It's all over," said he cheerfully.

"But, Henry—tell me—what on earth!"

"No particular damage beyond what court plaster and Peter's tailor can fix up."

"But—but—how is it over so soon? What are they doing?"

"When I left, Zanin was entertaining that attorney chap."

"And Peter?"

"Down on his hands and knees trying to find the contract."

"Is he—will he—"

"Sign it? Yes. They want you to sign, too. But I told them you'd do it in the morning. You're to have a ten per cent. interest—Zanin and Peter each fifteen."

"But I don't want—"

"May as well take it. You've earned it. . . .

Look here, Sue, has it occurred to you that we—you and I—haven't had a morsel to eat yet?"

She started in genuine surprise; looked up at him with an intent expression that he could not, at the moment, fathom; then suddenly threw back her head.

"Henry," she said, a ring in her voice, "I—I'm not engaged any more—not to anybody! I want—" she gave a slow little laugh—"some oysters."

"At Jim's!" he cried.

He slipped his arm through hers. Free-hearted as the birds that slumbered in the trees overhead they strolled over to the congenial oyster bar.

So passed The Nature Film Producing Co., Inc., Jacob Zanin, Pres't.

CHAPTER XXII

A BACHELOR AT LARGE

YOU are to picture Washington Square at the beginning of June. Very early in the morning—to be accurate, eight-fifty. Without the old bachelor apartment building, fresh green trees, air steaming and quivering with radiation and evaporation from warm wet asphalt, rumbling autobusses, endless streams of men and girls hurrying eastward and northward to the day's work or turning into the commercial-looking University building at our right, and hard at it, the inevitable hurdy gurdy; within, seventh floor front, large dim studio, Hy Lowe buttoning his collar and singing lustily—

> "I want si-*imp*-athee,
> Si-*imp*-athee, just s*ymp*-ah-thee!"

The collar buttoned, Hy, still roaring, clasped an imaginary partner to his breast and deftly executed the bafflingly simple step of the hesitation waltz over which New York was at the moment, as Hy

would put it, dippy. Hy's eyes were heavy and red and decorated with the dark circles of tradition, but his feet moved lightly, blithely. Hy could dance on his own tombstone—and he would dance well.

At one of the two front windows Henry Bates, of *The Courier,* otherwise the Worm, in striped, buttonless pajamas caught across the chest with a safety-pin, gazed down at the Square while feeling absently along the sill for the cream bottle.

The third member of our little group of bachelors, Peter Ericson Mann, was away; down at Atlantic City, working or something. Also nursing a broken heart. For everybody knew now that he and Sue Wilde were not to be married.

The desk served as breakfast table; an old newspaper as cloth. There were flaked cereal in bowls, coffee from the percolator on the bookcase, rolls from a paper sack.

The Worm lingered over his coffee. Hy gulped his, glancing frequently at his watch, propped against the inkstand.

"Oh," observed the Worm, pausing in his task of cleaning his pipe with a letter opener, "I nearly forgot. A lady called up. While you were in the bath tub."

"This morning?" Hy's face went discreetly blank.

"Yes, Miss—Miss—sounded like Banana."

"Miss Sorana." Hy's eyelids fluttered an instant. Then he lit a cigarette and was again his lightly imperturbable self. "What an ungodly hour!" he murmured, "for Silvia, of all girls. But she knows she mustn't call me at the office."

The Worm regarded his roommate with discerning, mildly humorous eyes. "Who, may I ask, is Silvia? And what is she?"

Hy missed the allusion. "If *The Evening Earth* were ever to come into possession of my recent letters which I devoutly hope and trust they won't"—Hy staged a shudder—"they would undoubtedly refer to her as 'an actress.' Just like that. An actress."

"Hm!" mused the Worm, "it's in writing already, eh!"

Hy shrugged his shoulders. "The old world has to go round," said he. Then his eyes grew dreamy. "But, my boy, my boy! You should see her—the darling of the gods! Absolutely the darling of the gods! Met her at the Grand Roof. Good lord! figured in cold calendar arithmetic, it isn't eight days. But then, they say eternity is but a moment."

"A dancing case?" queried the Worm.

Hy nodded. "After ten steps, my son, we knew!

Absolute-ly knew! She knew. I knew. We were helpless—it had to be."

At this point Hy pocketed his watch and settled back to smoke comfortably. He always bolted his breakfast by the watch; he always chatted or read the paper afterward; he was always late at the office.

The Worm was studying him quizzically. "Hy," he said, "how do you do it?"

"Do what?" queried Hy, struggling with a smile of self-conscious elation.

"Oh, come! You know. This!" The Worm gestured inclusively with his pipe. "Ten days ago it was that Hilda Hansen person from Wisconsin. Two weeks before that—"

Hy raised his hand. "Go easy with the dead past, my son."

The Worm pressed on. "Morally, ethically, you are doubtless open to criticism. As are the rest of us. That is neither here nor there. What I want to know is, how do you do it? You're not beautiful. You're not witty—though the younger among 'em might think you were, for the first few hours. But the ladies, God bless 'em!—overlooking many men of character and charm, overlooking even myself—come after you by platoons, regiments, brigades.

They fairly break in your door. What is it? How do you do it?"

"It's a gift," said Hy cheerily, "plus experience."

The Worm was slowly shaking his head. "It's not experience," he said. "That's a factor, but that's not it. You hit it the first time. It's a gift—perhaps plus eyelashes."

"But, my boy, I sometimes fail. Take the case you were about to mention—Betty Deane. I regard Betty as my most notable miscalculation—my Dardanelles."

"Not for a minute, Hy. As I've heard the story, Betty was afraid of you, ran away, married in a panic. She, a self-expresser of the self-expressers, a seeker of the Newest Freedom, marries a small standpatter who makes gas engines. To escape your hypnotic influence. No—I can't concede it. That, sir, was a tribute to your prowess, no less."

Hy assumed an expression of modesty. "If you know all about it, why ask me? I don't know. A man like me, reasonably young, reasonably hard-working, reasonably susceptible—well, good lord! I need the feminine—"

"I'm not puzzled about the demand," said the Worm, "but the supply."

"Oh, come! There aren't so many. I did have

that little flare-up with Betty. She promised to go away with me on the night boat. She didn't turn up; I took that trip alone."

"It got as far as that, eh?"

"It did. Whatever her reasons she skipped back to her home town and married the maker of gas engines. The Hilda Hansen matter caught me on the rebound. There couldn't ever have been anything in that, anyway. The girl's a leaner. Hasn't even a protective crust. Some kind uncle ought to take her and her little wall-paper designs back to Wisconsin. But this is—different!" He fumbled rather excitedly in his pocket and produced a letter—pages and pages of it, closely written in a nervous hand that was distinguished mainly by unusually heavy down strokes of a stub pen. He glanced eagerly through it, coloring as his eyes fell on this phrase and that. "You know, I'd almost like to read you a little of it. Damn it, the girl's got something—courage, fire, personality! She's perfectly wild—a pagan woman! She's—"

The Worm raised an arresting pipe. "Don't," he said dryly. "Never do that! Besides, your defense, while fairly plausible, accounts for only about three months of your life."

Slightly crestfallen, Hy read on in silence. Then

he turned back and started at the beginning. Finally, looking up and catching the Worm's interested, critical eyes on him, he stuffed the document back into his pocket, lit a new cigarette, got up, found his hat and stick, stood a moment in moody silence, sighed deeply and went out.

The telephone rang. As the Worm drew the instrument toward him and lifted the receiver the door opened and Hy came charging back.

The voice was feminine. "Is Mr. Lowe there?" it said.

"Gimme that phone!" breathed Hy, reaching for it.

The Worm swung out of his reach. "No," he said into the transmitter, "he's gone out. Just a moment ago. Would you like to leave any message?" And dodging behind the desk, he grinned at Hy.

That young man was speechless.

"Who did you say?" Thus the Worm into the telephone. "Mrs. Bixbee?" He spoke swiftly to Hy. "It's funny. I've heard the voice. But Mrs. Bixbee!" Then into the telephone. "Yes, this is Mr. Bates. Oh, you were Betty Deane? Yes, indeed! Wait a moment. I think he has just come in again. I'll call him."

But at that name Hy bolted. The door slammed after him. The Worm could hear him running along the outer corridor and down the stairs. He had not stopped to ring for the elevator.

"No," said the Worm now unblushingly, "I was mistaken. He isn't here. That was the floor maid."

As he pushed the instrument back on the desk, he sighed and shook his head. "That's it," he said aloud, with humility. "It's a gift."

CHAPTER XXIII

THE BUZZER

NEW YORK, as much as Paris or Peking, is the city of bizarre contrasts. One such is modestly illustrated in the life of Hy Lowe.

Hy hurried on this as on every working morning eastward across Broadway and through Astor Place to the large five-story structure, a block in length, near the heart of the Bowery, that had been known for seventy years as Scripture House. Tract societies clustered within the brownstone walls, publishers of hymn books and testaments, lecture bureaus, church extension groups, temperance and anti-cigarette societies, firms of lady typists, and with these, flocks of shorter-lived concerns whose literature was pious and whose aims were profoundly commercial. Long years before, when men wore beavers and stocks and women wore hoopskirts, the building had symbolized the organized evangelical forces that were to galvanize and remake a corrupt world.

But the world had somehow evaded this particular galvanizing process. It had plunged wildly on the little heretical matter of applied science; which in its turn had invaded the building in the form of electric light and power and creakily insecure elevators. The Trusts had come, and Labor Unions and Economic Determinism—even the I. W. W. and the mad Nietzschean propaganda of the Greenwich Village New Russianists. Not to mention War. Life had twisted itself into puzzling shapes. New York had followed farther and farther up-town its elevated roads, subways, steel-built sky-scrapers and amazing palaces of liquors and lobsters, leaving the old building not even the scant privilege of dominating the slums and factories that had crept gradually to and around it. And now as a last negligent insult, a very new generation—a confused generation of Jews, Italians, Irish, Poles, Slavs, serving as bookkeepers, stenographers, messengers, door girls, elevator boys—idled and flirted and enacted their little worldly comedies and tragedies within the very walls of Scripture House—practised a furtive dance step or two in the dim stock rooms, dreamed of broiled lobsters (even of liquors) while patient men with white string neckties and routine minds sat in inner offices and con-

tinued the traditional effort to remake that forgotten old world.

But if the vision had failed, many a successful enterprise, then and now, thrived under the cover of Scripture House. One had thrived there for thirty years—the independent missionary weekly known to you as *My Brother's Keeper*. This publication was the "meal ticket" to which Hy, at rare intervals, referred. On the ground glass of his office door were the words, lettered in black, "Assistant Editor." To this altitude had eight years of reporting and editing elevated Hy Lowe. The compensating honorarium was forty-five dollars a week. Not a great amount for one whose nature demanded correct clothing, Broadway dinners, pretty girls and an occasional taxicab; still a bachelor who lives inexpensively as to rooms, breakfasts and lunches and is not too hard on his clothes can go reasonably far on forty-five dollars, even in New York.

On this as on other mornings Hy, after a smile and a wink for the noticeably pretty little telephone girl in the outer office, slid along the inner corridor close to the wood and glass partition. Though the Walrus' open doorway dominated the corridor, there was always a chance of slipping in unnoted.

He opened and closed his own door very softly;

whipped off and hung up his street coat; donned the old black alpaca that was curiously bronzed from the pockets down by thousands of wipings of purple ink; and within twenty seconds was seated at his desk going through the morning's mail.

A buzzer sounded—on the partition just above his head. Hy started; turned and stared at the innocent little electrical machine. His color mounted. He compressed his lips. He picked up the editorial shears and deliberately slipped one blade under the insulated wires that led away from the buzzer.

Again the sound! Hy's fingers relaxed. He snorted, tossed the shears on the desk, strode to the door, paused to compose his features; then wearing the blankly innocent expression that meant forty-five dollars a week, walked quietly into the big room at the end of the corridor where, behind a flat mahogany desk seven feet square, sat the Reverend Hubbell Harkness Wilde, D. D.

On the wall behind him lettered in gold leaf on black enamel, hung the apothegm (not from the eloquent pen of Doctor Wilde)—"It is more blessed to give than to receive." Beneath, in a long mahogany bookcase, were hundreds of volumes, every one inscribed in gratitude and admiration to the editor of *My Brother's Keeper*. The great desk was

heaped with books, manuscripts, folders of correspondence. Beside it, pencil warily poised, sat Miss Hardwick, who for more than twenty years had followed Doctor Wilde about these offices—during most of every working day taking down his most trivial utterances, every word, to be transcribed later on the typewriter by her three six-dollar-a-week girls. It was from the resulting mass of verbiage that Miss Hardwick and the doctor dug out and arranged the weekly sermon-editorials that you read when you were a Sunday-school pupil and that your non-citified aunts and uncles are reading in book form to this day. They were a force, these sermons. Make no mistake about that! They had a sensational vigor that you rarely heard from the formal pulpit. The back-cover announcements of feature-sermons to come were stirring in themselves. If your mind be "practical," scorning all mystical theorizings, let me pass on to you the inside information that through sermons and advertisements of sermons and sensational full-page appeals in display type this man whom Hy light-mindedly dismissed with the title of "the Walrus" had collected more than two million dollars in twenty years for those mission stations of his in Africa or Madagascar (or wherever they were). That is slightly

upward of a hundred thousand a year in actual money, as a net average!

We have had a momentary glimpse of Doctor Wilde. That was at the Crossroads Theater, where his runaway daughter was playing a boy in Jacob Zanin's playlet, *Any Street.* But the Walrus was then out of his proper setting—was merely a grim hint of a forgotten Puritanism in that little Bohemian world of experimental compliance with the Freudian Wish.

We see him in his proper setting here. The old-fashioned woodcut of him that was always in the upper left corner of sermon or announcement was made in 1886—that square, young, strong face, prominent nose, penetrating eyes. Even then it flattered him. The man now sitting at the enormous desk was twenty-nine years older. The big hooked nose was still there. The pale-green eyes were still a striking feature; but they looked tired now. There was the strip of whisker on each cheek, close-clipped, tinged now with gray. He was heavier in neck and shoulders. There were deep lines about the wide, thin, orator's mouth. Despite the nose and eyes there was something yielding about that mouth; something of the old politician who has learned to temper strength with craft, who has learned, too, that hu-

man nature moves and functions within rather narrow limits and is assailed by subtle weaknesses. It was an enigmatic face. Beneath it were low turnover collar, the usual white string tie and a well-worn black frock coat.

Doctor Wilde was nervous this morning. His eyes found it difficult to meet those of his mild-faced assistant in the old alpaca office coat.

"Miss Hardwick—you may go, please!" Thus Doctor Wilde; and he threw out his hands in a nervous gesture.

For an instant, sensing some new tension in the office atmosphere, Hy caught himself thinking of Sue Wilde. She had a trick of throwing out her hands like that. Only she did it with extraordinary grace. In certain ways they were alike, this eccentric gifted man and his eccentric equally gifted daughter. Not in all particulars; for Sue had charm. "Must get it from her mother's side," mused Hy. He knew that the mother was dead, that the house from which Sue had fled to Greenwich Village and Art and Freedom was now presided over by a second wife who dressed surprisingly well, and whose two children—little girls—were on occasions brought into the office.

His reverie ended abruptly. Miss Hardwick had

gathered up her note-books and pencils; was rising now; and as she passed out, released in Hy's direction one look that almost frightened him. It was a barbed shaft of bitter malevolence, oddly confused with trembling, incredible triumph.

"Sit down, please!" It was Doctor Wilde's voice. Hy sat down in the chair that was always kept for him across the huge desk from the doctor. That gentleman had himself risen, creaked over to the door, was closing it securely.

What had that queer look meant? From Miss Hardwick of all people! To Hy she had been hardly more than an office fixture. But in that brief instant she had revealed depths of hatred, malignant jealousy—something!

The doctor sank heavily into his own chair. Hy, mystified, watched him and waited. The man reached for a paper-weight—a brass model of his first mission house from Africa or Madagascar or somewhere—and placed it before him on top of the unopened morning's mail, moved it this way, then a little that way and looked at it critically. Hy, more and more startled, a thought hypnotized, leaned forward on the desk and gazed at that little brass house. Finally the doctor spoke:

"I have an unpleasant duty—but it is not a matter that I can lightly pass over—"

Hy paled a little, knit his brows, stared with increasing intensity at that mission house of brass.

"For a long time, Mr. Lowe, I have felt that your conduct was not—"

"Oh," thought Hy, in a daze, "my conduct was not—"

"—was not—well, in keeping with your position."

"With my position." Hy's numb mind repeated.

"This is not a matter of a particular act or a particular occasion, Mr. Lowe. For a long time it has been known to me that you sought undesirable companions, that you have been repeatedly seen in—in Broadway resorts."

Hy's mind was stirring awake now, darting this way and that like a frightened mouse. Some one had been talking to the doctor—and very recently. The man was a coward in office matters; he had been goaded to this. The "for a long time," so heavily repeated, was of course a verbal blind. Could it have been—not Miss Hardwick. Then Hy was surprised to hear his own voice:

"But this is a charge, Doctor Wilde! A charge

should be definite." The words came mechanically. Hy must have read them somewhere. "I surely have a right to know what has been said about me."

"I don't know that it is necessary to be specific," said the doctor, apparently now that the issue was joined, finding his task easier.

"I must insist!" cried Hy, on his feet now. He was thinking—"What has she told him? What does she know? What does she know!"

"Sit down!" said Doctor Wilde.

Hy sat down. His chief moved the mission house a trifle to square it with the edge of the desk.

"To mention only one occasion," went on the doctor's voice—"though many are known to me, I am well informed regarding the sort of life you are known to be leading. You see, Mr. Lowe, you must understand that the office atmosphere of *My Brother's Keeper* is above reproach. Ability alone will not carry a man here. There are standards finer and truer than—"

A rhetorical note was creeping into the man's voice. He turned instinctively to see if Miss Hardwick was catching the precious words as they fell from his lips; then with his eyes on her empty chair he floundered.

The telephone rang. Hy, with alacrity grown out

of long practise in fending for his chief, reached for it.

"Oh, Mr. Lowe—" It was the voice of the pretty little telephone girl: "It's a lady! She simply won't be put off! Could you—"

"Tell him," said Hy with cold solemnity, "that I am in an important conference."

"I did tell her that, Mr. Lowe."

"Very well—ask him to leave his number. I can not be disturbed now."

He hung up the receiver. "Doctor Wilde," he said in the same solemn tone. "I realize of course that you are asking for my resignation. But first I must know the charge against me. There has been an attack on my character. I have the right to demand full knowledge of it."

"To mention only one occasion," said the doctor, as if unaware of the interruption, still fussing with the mission house, "you were seen, as recently as last evening, leaving a questionable restaurant in company with a still more questionable young woman."

So that was all he knew! Hy breathed a very little more easily. Then the telephone rang again, and Hy's overstrained nerves jumped like mad.

"Very well," said he to the pretty telephone girl,

"put him on my wire." And to his chief: "You will have to excuse me, Doctor. This appears to be important." He rose with extreme dignity and left the room.

Once within his own office he stood clinging to the door-knob, breathing hard. It was all over! He was fired. He must begin life again—like General Grant. His own telephone bell was ringing frantically. At first he hardly heard it. Finally he pulled himself together and moved toward the desk. It would be Betty, of course. She ought to have more sense! Why hadn't she stayed up-state with that new husband of hers, anyway! Wasn't life disastrous enough without a very much entangled, contrite Betty on his own still more entangled hands.

But the voice was not that of Betty. Nor was it the voice of Silvia. It was a soft little voice, melodious, hesitating. It was familiar, yet unfamiliar.

"Oh," it said, "is that you? I've had such a hard time getting you."

"I'm sorry!" breathed Hy. Who was she?

"Are you awfully busy?"

Hy hesitated. Deep amid the heaped and smoking ruins of his life a little warm thing was stirring. It was the very instinct for adventure. He looked

grimly about the room, to be his office no longer. He didn't care particularly what happened now. His own voice even took on something of the strange girl's softness.

"Not so awfully," said he. Then groping for words added: "Where are you now?"

"Up at the Grand Central."

"Goodness! You're not going away—now?"

"Yes—going home. I feel awfully bad about it."

A silence intervened. Then this from Hy:

"You—you're not alone up there?"

"All alone." What a charmingly plaintive little voice it was, anyway! The healthy color was returning to Hy's cheeks.

"Well," said he—"well, say—"

"Yes?" she murmured.

"How long—when does your train go?"

"Oh, could you? I didn't dare ask—you seemed so busy!"

"I could be there in—well, under fifteen minutes."

"Oh, good. I've got—let me see—nearly half an hour."

"Be by the clock in the main waiting-room. Good-by!"

Hy slammed down the receiver; tore off the alpaca coat and stuffed it into the waste basket; got

into his street coat; observed the editorial shears on the desk; seized them, cut the buzzer wires, noted with satisfaction the nick he made in one blade; threw the shears to the floor and rushed from the office.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE WILD PAGAN PERSON

AT the flower store in the station he bought a red carnation for his lapel and walked briskly toward the big clock.

A slim girl was there at the inquiry desk, very attractively dressed. His pulse bounded. She turned a forlornly pretty face and he saw that it was Hilda Hansen of Wisconsin.

Their hands met. They wandered off toward the dim corridor where the telephones are.

"It was dear of you to come," said she rather shyly. "I shall feel better now. I was beginning to think—well, that you didn't like me very well."

"Hilda—that's not fair!" he murmured. Murmured, if the whole truth were told, rather blithely. For Hilda was pretty. Her soft dependence was the sweetest flattery. Her simple, easily satisfied mind was a relief after certain slightly more desperate adventures. And so, when he said, "I'm sorry you're going, Hilda. Is it for long?" he spoke as sincerely as is commonly done.

"For good!" she blurted out in reply to this; and the tears came. He took her arm and walked her farther down the corridor. The little story was tumbling out now, helter skelter. Her father had stopped her allowance, ordered her home. She was leaving forever the freedom of dear old Greenwich Village. Naturally Hy kissed her.

He kissed her again, right out on the train platform, with belated passengers elbowing by and porters looking on. It was Hy's little sacrament of freedom. He could kiss them now—in public—as he chose! For he was fired. No more gloomy old office! No more of the gliding Miss Hardwick! No more of the doctor's oratory! No more of that damn buzzer!

The thing to do, of course, was to go back and pack up his belongings; but he couldn't bring himself to it. So he stayed out until lunch time, filling in the odd hour with an eleven o'clock movie show. He lunched expensively and alone at the club, off a porterhouse steak with mushrooms, potatoes "au gratin," creamed spinach, musty ale in pewter, romaine salad, Camembert cheese with toasted biscuit and black coffee.

When he reentered his office, who should be sitting there but the Worm. Before he could overcome

a slight embarrassment and begin the necessary process of telling his story, a heavy crushing step sounded in the corridor, passed the door, went on into the big room in the corner.

The Worm rose abruptly.

"Isn't that the Walrus?" he asked.

"The same," said Hy.

"I've got to see him. Will you take me in?"

"Oh, sit down! I can tell you more than he can."

"Perhaps, but at another time."

Hy emerged from his self-absorption at this point sufficiently to observe that the Worm, usually smiling and calm, was laboring under some excitement.

"All right," said he, "come along!" And quite light of heart, afraid of nothing now, he led the Worm in and introduced him as, "My friend, Mr. Bates of *The Courier*. Then, hearing his telephone ringing again, he hurried back to his own office.

It would be Betty, of course. Well, as far as the office was concerned, it didn't matter now. She could call! Anybody could call. . . . He picked up the receiver.

"Oh," he murmured—"hello, Silvia! Wait a moment." He got up and closed the door. "All right," he said then. "What is it, little girl?"

"Oh!" said she, "thank God, I've found you!

Hy, something dreadful has almost happened. It has done such things to my pride! But I knew you wouldn't want me to turn to any one else for help, would you?"

"Oh, no," said he, with sudden queer misgivings, "of course not! Not for a minute!"

"I knew you'd feel that way, dear. Are you dreadfully busy? Could you—I know it's a lot to ask—but could you, for me, dear, run out for five minutes?"

"I will!" said he, with an emphasis aimed as much at himself as at her. "Where are you?"

"I'm talking from the drug store across the street, right near you. I'll wait outside."

The misgivings deepened as Hy walked slowly out to the elevator and then out to the street. Hy would have to be classified, in the last analysis, as a city bachelor, a seasoned, hardened city bachelor. The one prospect that instantly and utterly terrifies a hardened city bachelor is that of admitting that another has a moral claim upon him. The essence of bachelordom is the avoidance of personal responsibility. Therefore it was a reserved, rather dignified Hy who crossed the street and joined the supple, big-eyed, conspicuous young woman in the perfect-fitting tailor suit. Another factor in Hy's mood, perhaps, was that the memory of Hilda Hansen's

soft young lips against his own had not yet wholly died.

He and Silvia walked slowly around the corner.

"I don't know how to tell you," she said in an unsteady voice. There were tears in her eyes, too. "Hy, it's awful! It's my—my furniture!" The tears fell now. She wiped them away. "They say positively they'll take it away to-night. Every stick. I've cried so! I tried to explain that I'm actually rehearsing with Cunningham. Before the end of the month I can take care of it easily. But—"

Hy stopped short, stood on the curb, looked at her. His head was clear and cold as an adding machine. "How much would it take?" said he.

"Oh, Hy." She was crying again. "Don't talk in that way—so cold—"

"I know," he broke in, "but—"

"It's fifty dollars. You see—"

"I haven't got it," said he.

There was a perceptible ring in his voice. She looked at him, puzzled.

"Silvia, dear—I'm fired."

"Fired? Hy—when?"

"To-day. Chucked out. I haven't got half of that—to live on, even."

"Oh, my dear boy, you oughtn't to live in this careless way, not saving a cent—"

"Of course I oughtn't. But I do. That's me."

"But what on earth—what reason—"

"Conduct. I'm a bad one." He was almost triumphant. "Only last night I was seen leaving a questionable restaurant—where they dance and drink—with a young lady—"

The tears were not falling now. Miss Silvia Sorana was looking straight at him, thoughtful, even cool.

"Are you telling me the truth, Hy Lowe?"

"The gospel. I'm not even the proletariat. I'm the unemployed."

"Well," said she—"well!" And she thought it deliberately out. "Well—I guess you can't be blamed for that!"

Which impressed Hy later when he thought it over, as a curious remark. They parted shortly after this.

But first she said, "Hy, dear, I don't like to seem to be leaving you on account of this. It must be dreadfully hard for you." So they had a soda, sitting in the drug store window. Hy almost smiled, thinking of the madness of it—he and an unmistakable actress, in working hours, here actually in the shadow of grim old Scripture House! And it was nobody's business! It could hurt nobody! He had

not known that freedom would be like this. There was a thrill about it; so deep a thrill that after he had put the sympathetic but plainly hurrying Silvia on an up-town car and had paid for her as she entered, he could not bring himself to return to the office. Even with the Worm up there, wondering what had become of him. Even with all his personal belongings waiting to be cleared from the desk and packed.

He wandered over to Washington Square, his spirit reveling in the lazy June sunshine. He stopped and listened to the untiring hurdy gurdy; threw coins to the little Italian girls dancing on the pavement. He thought of stopping in at the Parisian, ordering a "sirop" and reading or trying to read, those delightfully naughty French weeklies. He knew definitely now that he was out for a good time.

There was a difficulty. It is easier to have a good time when there is a girl about. Really it was rather inopportune that Hilda Hansen had flitted back to Wisconsin. She needed a guardian; still she had been an appealing young thing up there at the Grand Central. But she had gone! And Silvia—well, that little affair had taken an odd and not overpleasant turn. The pagan person had, plainly, her sophisti-

cated moments. He was glad that he had seen through her. For that matter, you couldn't ever trust her sort.

Then creeping back into his mind like a pet dog after a beating, hesitant, all fears and doubts of a welcome, came the thought of Betty Deane.

CHAPTER XXV

HE WHO HESITATED

WHERE was Betty, anyway! And why hadn't she called up the office. It began to seem to him that she might have done that after her little effort of the morning. Hitherto, before that ridiculous marriage of hers, she had always put up with Sue Wilde, over in Tenth Street. Perhaps she was there now. Mental pictures began to form of Betty's luxuriant blonde beauty. And it was something for a peach like that to leave home and rich husband, come hurrying down to New York and call you up at an ungodly hour in the morning. He remembered suddenly, warmly, the time he had first kissed Betty—over in New Jersey, on a green hillside, of a glowing afternoon. His laziness fell away. Briskly he walked around into Tenth Street and rang Sue's bell.

Betty answered—prettier than ever, a rounded but swaying young creature who said little and that slowly.

"Hello!" she said, "Sue's out."

"I don't want Sue. Came to see you, Betty. I'm fired—out of a job—and while it lasts, hilariously happy. How about a bite at the Parisian?"

So they had humorously early tea at the old French restaurant near the Square. Then Betty went up-town on the bus for a little shopping, and Hy walked, at last, back to the office. They had decided to meet again for dinner.

Scripture House loomed before him—long, dingy, grim in the gay sunshine. He stood motionless on the farther curb, staring at it. Had three years of his life been spent, miserably spent, on a treadmill, in that haunt of hypocrisy? Had he been selling his presumably immortal soul on the instalment plan, at forty-five a week? Or was it a hideous dream? Was he dreaming now?

He shuddered. Then, slowly, he walked across the street, deciding to pack up and get out for good just as swiftly as the thing could be done. He was glad, downright glad, that it was his character that had been so crudely assailed. That let him out. He needn't be decent—needn't wait a month to break in a new man—nothing like that! He wondered mildly what the Worm would say, and Peter? It might be necessary to borrow a bit until he could get going again. Though perhaps they would take

him back on the old paper until he could find something regular.

The sense of being haunted by a dream grew as he went up in the elevator and walked along the hall. He saw with new eyes the old building he had so long taken for granted—saw the worn hollows in the oak floors, the patched cracks in the plaster; he smelt the old musty odor with new repugnance; noted the legends on office doors he passed with a wry smile, the Reverend This and the Reverend That, the Society for the Suppression of Such and Such, the commercially religious Somebody & Company.

He had to will his hand to open the door lettered, "My Brother's Keeper; Hubbell Harkness Wilde, D. D." He had to will his feet to carry him within. But once within, he stood motionless and the queerness seized on him, widened his eyes, caught at his breath. For the place was absolutely still. Not a typewriter sounded. Not an argumentative voice floated out over the seven-foot partitions. It was like a dead place—uncanny, awful. For an instant he considered running; wondered fantastically whether his feet would turn to lead and hold him back as feet do in dreams.

But he stood his ground and looked cautiously

about. There within the rail, in the corner, the pretty little telephone girl sat motionless at her switchboard, watching him with eyes that stared stupidly out of a white face.

He stepped to her side—tiptoeing in spite of himself—tried to smile, cleared his throat, started at the sound; then whispered, "For Heaven's sake, what's the matter?" and patted the girl's cheek.

Ordinarily she would have dodged away and looked anxiously about in fear of being seen. Now she did nothing of the sort. After a moment she said, also whispering and quite incoherently—"Is Miss Hardwick going to have your room?"

At the sound of her voice and out of sheer nervousness, he gulped. She was alive, at least. He pinched her cheek; and shook his head, rather meaninglessly. Then he braced himself and went on in, wholly unaware that he was still tiptoeing.

Two girl stenographers sat in a corner, whispering. At sight of him they hushed. He passed on. The other girls were not at their desks, though he thought that most of their hats and coats hung in the farther corner as usual. The office boy was not to be seen. The copy editor and proof-reader was not in her cubby-hole at the end of the corridor. Miss Hardwick's door was shut; but as he passed he

thought he heard a rustle within, and he was certain that he saw the tip of a hat feather over the partition.

He came to his own door. It was ajar. He felt sure he had closed it when he left. It was his regular practise to close it. He stopped short, considering this as if it was a matter of genuine importance. Then it occurred to him that the boy might have been in there with proofs.

Doctor Wilde's door at the end of the corridor stood open. The seven-foot square mahogany desk, heaped with papers and books, looked natural enough, but the chair behind it was empty.

He tiptoed forward, threw his door open. Then he literally gasped. For there, between the desk and the window, stood the Walrus. He held the nicked editorial shears in his hand—he must have picked them up from the floor—and was in the act of looking from them to the cut ends of the wires by the buzzer.

Hy's overcharged nervous system leaped for the nearest outlet. "I cut the damn things myself," he said, "this morning."

The Walrus turned toward him an ashen face.

"Ah, yes," he said. "I didn't know they were objectionable to you."

"I've hated them for three years," said Hy.

"You should have spoken. It is better to speak of things."

"Speak nothing!" Hy sputtered. "I stood a fine chance."

"You know," observed Doctor Wilde, as if he had not heard—his voice was husky and curiously weak—"we were interrupted this morning. You were wrong in imagining that a resignation was necessary. You jumped at that conclusion. I should say that you were unnecessarily touchy."

"But my character—"

"I repeat, it seems to me that you were unnecessarily touchy. A man must not be too sensitive. He should be strong to take as well as give blows. Your actions, it seemed to me, perhaps wrongly, were a blow to me, to the prestige of this establishment. You must understand, Mr. Lowe, that in this life that we all must live"—absently he looked about to see if Miss Hardwick's pencil was poised to render imperishable the thought that he was about to put into words, caught himself, brushed a limp hand (with the shears in them) across his eyes, then went on with an effort—"I will say further that when we spoke this morning I had not seen the dummy for

the issue of July tenth. Now I don't mind telling you that I regard that as a good dummy. You have there caught my ideas of sound make-up better than ever before. And I have—"

"But my character—"

"—and I have just written instructions to Mr. Hennessy to make a change in your salary beginning with next Saturday's envelope. You are now doing the work of a full managing editor. Your income should be sufficient to enable you to support the position with reasonable dignity. Hereafter you will draw sixty dollars a week."

He moved toward the door. He seemed suddenly a really old man, grayer of hair and skin, more bent, less certain of his footing.

"Here!" cried Hy, sputtering in uncontrollable excitement, "those are my shears."

"Ah, so they are. I did not notice." And the Walrus came back, laid them carefully on the desk; then walked out, entered his own room, closed the door.

Hy shut his door, stood for a moment by the desk, sank, an inert figure, into his chair. His eyes focused on the old alpaca coat, stuffed into the waste basket. He took it out; spread it on the desk and

stared at the ink stains. "I can have it cleaned," he thought. Suddenly he pressed two shaking hands to his throbbing head.

"My God!" he muttered, aloud. "What did I say to him. What didn't I say to him? I'm a loon! I'm a nut! This is the asylum!"

He stiffened up; sat there for a moment, wild-eyed. He reached down and pinched his thigh, hard. He sprang up and paced the room. He wheeled suddenly, craftily, on the silent buzzer, there on the partition. So far all right—the wires were cut!

He saw the shears lying on the desk; pounced on them and feverishly examined the blades. One was nicked.

So far, so good. But the supreme test remained. He plunged out into the silent corridor, hesitated, stood wrestling with the devils within him, conquered them and white as all the ghosts tapped at Doctor Wilde's door, opened it a crack, stuck in his head, and said:

"How much did you say it was to be, Doctor?"

The Walrus compressed his lips, and then drew a deep breath that was not unlike a sigh. "The figure I mentioned," he replied, "was sixty dollars a week. If that is satisfactory to you."

Hy considered this. "On the whole," he said finally, "considering everything, I will agree to that."

At ten minutes past midnight Hy let himself into the rooms. One gas jet was burning dimly in the studio. As he stood on the threshold he could just make out the long figure of the Worm half reclining in the Morris chair by a wide-open window, attired in the striped pajamas of the morning. From one elevated foot dangled a slipper of Chinese straw. He was smoking his old brier.

"Hello!" said Hy cheerfully.

Silence. Then, "Hello!" replied the Worm.

Hy tossed his hat on the couch-bed of the absent Peter, then came and stood by the open window, thrust hands deep into trousers pockets, sniffed the mild evening air, gazed benevolently on the trees, lights and little moving figures of the Square. Then he lit a cigarette.

"Great night, my son!" said he.

The Worm lowered his pipe, looked up with sudden sharp interest, studied the gay young person standing so buoyantly there before him; then replaced the pipe and smoked on in silence.

"Oh, come!" cried Hy, after a bit. "Buck up! Be a live young newspaper man!"

"I'm not a newspaper man,'" replied the Worm.

"You're not a—you were this afternoon."

"True."

"Say, my son, what were you around for to-day?"

The pipe came down again. "You mean to say you don't know?"

"Not a thing. Except that the place went absolutely on the fritz. I thought I had 'em."

"I don't wonder," muttered Henry Bates.

"And the Walrus raised me fifteen bucks per. Just like that!"

"He raised you?"

"Yes, my child." Hy came around, sat on the desk, dangled his legs.

"Then," observed the Worm, "he certainly thinks you know."

"Elucidate! Elucidate!"

The Worm knocked the ashes from his pipe; turned the warm bowl around and around in his hand. "Our paper—I should say *The Courier*—has a story on Doctor Wilde—a charge that he has misappropriated missionary funds. They sent me up to-day to ask if he would consent to an accounting."

Hy whistled.

"The amount is put roughly at a million dollars. I didn't care much about the assignment."

"I should think not."

"I'm fond of Sue. But it was my job. When I told him what I was there for, he ran me out of his office, locked the door and shouted through the transom that he had a bottle of poison in his desk and would take it if I wouldn't agree to suppress the story. As if he'd planned exactly that scene for years."

"Aha," cried Hy—"melodrama."

"Precisely. Melodrama. It was unpleasant."

"You accepted the gentleman's proposition, I take it."

"I dislike murders."

Hy, considering this, stiffened up. "Say," he cried, "what's the paper going to do about it?"

"I saw the assistant city editor this evening at the Parisian bar. He tells me they have decided to drop the story. But they dropped me first." He looked shrewdly at Hy. "So don't worry. You can count on your raise."

Hy's cigarette had gone out. He looked at it, tossed it out the window, lit a fresh one.

"Of course," said he, "a fellow likes to know where he gets off."

"Or at least that he is off," said the Worm, and went to bed.

Hy let him go. A dreamy expression came into his eyes. As he threw off coat and waistcoat and started unbuttoning his collar, he hummed softly:

> "I want si-*imp*-athee,
> Si-*imp*-athee, just *symp*-ah-thee."

He embraced an imaginary young woman—a blonde who was slow of speech and luxurious in movements—and danced slowly, rather gracefully across the room.

All was right with the world!

CHAPTER XXVI

ENTER MARIA TONIFETTI

THOUGH there is no known specific for heartache, there are palliatives. One such Peter Ericson Mann found in the head barber's chair at the strictly sanitary shop of Marius. The necessity, during all the spring months, of avoiding this shop had irked Peter; for he was given to worry in the matter of bacteria. And he could not himself shave his thin and tender skin without irritating it to the point of eruption.

The shop of Marius was in the basement of that most interesting of New York restaurants, the Parisian. The place is wholly French, from the large trees out front and in their shade the sleepy victorias always waiting at the curb to the Looeys and Sharlses and Gastongs that serve you within. It is there a distinction to be known of the maître d'hôtel, an achievement to nod to the proprietor.

Greenwich Village, when in funds, dines, lunches, breakfasts at the Parisian. Upper West Side, when seeking the quaintly foreign dissociated

from squalor, dines there. Upper West Side always goes up the wide front steps and through the busy little office into the airy eating rooms with full length hinged windows. There is music here; a switchboard youth who giftedly blends slang with argot; even, it has been reported, an interior fountain. Greenwich Village now and again ascends those wide front steps; but more often frequents the basement where is neither fountain nor music, merely chairs, tables and ineffable food; these latter in three or four small rooms which you may enter from the Avenue, directly under the steps, or from the side street through the bar. The corner room, nearest the bar, is a haunt of such newspaper men as live in the neighborhood. Also in the basement is a rather obscure and crooked passage extending from the bar past the small rooms and the barber shop of Marius to the equally obscure and crooked stairway that leads by way of telephone booths and a passage to the little office hallway and the upper restaurant. The whole, apparently, was arranged with the mechanics of French farce uppermost in the mind of the architect.

Peter's large horn-rimmed eye-glasses hung by their heavy black ribbon from the frame of the mirror; his long person lay, relaxed, in the chair. His

right foot rested on a bent-wire stand; and kneeling respectfully before it, polishing the shoe, was the boy called Theophile. His left hand lay on the soft palm of Miss Maria Tonifetti who was working soothingly, head bowed, on the thumb nail. Miss Tonifetti was pretty. She happens to be the reason why Peter had kept away from the shop of Marius all spring. These Italian girls, from below Washington Square, were known to be of an impetuous temper. Hy Lowe had on several occasions advised Peter to let them alone. Hy believed that they carried knives. Now, however, finding Maria so subdued, if gloomily emotional, of eye, experiencing again the old soft thrill as her deft smooth fingers touched and pressed his own, he was seriously considering asking her out to dinner. He had first thought of this while Marius (himself) was plying the razor. (What a hand had Marius!) The notion grew during the drowsily comfortable shampoo that came next. With the face massage, and the steaming towels that followed it—one of these now covered his face, with a minute breathing hole above the nose—came a gentle glow of tenderness toward all the world and particularly toward Miss Tonifetti. After all, he had never intended neglecting her. Life is so complex!

I had hoped to slip through this narrative with no more than an occasional and casual allusion to Maria. But this, it appears, is not possible. She matters. And even at the risk of a descent into unromantic actuality, into what you might call "realism," she enters at this point.

Peter himself, like most of us, disliked actuality. His plays were all of duty and self-sacrifice and brooding tenderness and that curious structure that is known throughout the theatrical district as Honor. Honor with a very large H—accompanied, usually, with a declamatory gesture and a protruding chest. Sue, at her first meeting with Peter, when she talked out so impulsively, really said the last word about his plays. Peter's thoughts of himself (and these never flagged) often took the form of recollecting occasions when he had been kind to newsboys or when he had lent a helping hand to needy young women without exacting a quid pro quo. The occasions when he had not been kind took the memory-shape of proper indignation aroused by bitter injustice to himself. He had suffered greatly from injustice as from misunderstanding. Few, indeed, understood him; which fact added incalculably to the difficulties of life.

Now just a word of recent history and we shall

get on with our story. When Sue broke her engagement to Peter he took his broken heart away to Atlantic City, where he had before now found diversion and the impulse to work. He had suffered deeply, these nearly two weeks. His food had not set well. The thought of solitary outdoor exercise, even ocean swimming, had been repellent. And until the last two or three nights, his sleeplessness had been so marked as really to worry him. Night after night he had caught himself sitting straight up in bed saying, aloud, harsh things to the penitent weeping Sue of his dreams. Usually after these experiences his thoughts and nerves had proved to be in such a tangle that his only recourse had been to switch on the lights and, with a trembling hand and an ache at the back of his head, plunge into his work. The work, therefore (it was a new play), had gone rather well—so well that when the expensiveness of the life began to appear really alarming he was ready to come back to the old haunts and make the effort to hold up his head. He had got into New York at four-ten and come down to the shop of Marius by taxi. His suit-case and grip were over in the corner by the coat rack.

It was now nearly five-thirty. The face massage was over with; his thick dark hair had been brushed

into place by the one barber in New York who did not ask "Wet or dry?" And he was comfortably seated, across the shop, at Miss Tonifetti's little wire-legged table, for the finishing strokes of the buffer and the final soap-and-water rinsing in the glass bowl. He looked at the bent head and slightly drooping shoulders of the girl. The head was nicely poised. The hair was abundant and exceptionally fine. It massed well. As at certain other moments in the dim past his nature reacted pleasantly to some esthetically pleasing quality in hair, head, shoulders and curve of dark cheek. Just then she glanced up, flushed perceptibly, then dropped her eyes and went on with her work—which consisted at the moment in giving a final polish by brushing the nails lightly with the palm of her hand.

The glow in Peter's heart leaped up into something near real warmth. He leaned forward, glanced swiftly about, then said, low: "It has been hard, Maria—not seeing you."

The dark head bent lower.

"It did seem best. You know."

The head nodded a very little—doubtfully.

"There's no sense in being too hard on ourselves, Maria. Suppose—oh, come on and have dinner with me."

Again the head was inclined in assent. And he heard her whisper, "Where?"

Peter thought swiftly. This was not a matter for his acquaintances of the Square and Greenwich Village. Then, too, a gentleman always "protected the girl." Suddenly he remembered:

"Meet me at the old place—corner of Tenth. We can take the bus up-town. You can't get off early?"

She shook her head.

"All right. Say twenty after to half-past seven. I'll leave my bags here for the present."

This, after all, was living! It was best. You had to keep on. And it would be nice to give Maria a good time. She had been exacting in the past, given to unexpected outbursts, a girl of secretive ways, but of violent impulses, that she seemed always struggling to suppress. He had noted before now a passionate sort of gloom in the girl. To-day, though, she was charming, gentle enough for anybody. Yes, for old times' sake—in memory of certain intense little episodes they two had shared, he would give her a nice evening. . . . With such thoughts he complacently lighted a cigarette, smiled covertly at the girl, who was following him furtively with her big dark eyes and went back through the crooked corridor to the bar.

Here we find Hy Lowe engaged in buying a drink for Sumner Smith, one of the best-known reporters on that most audaciously unscrupulously brilliant of newspapers, *The Evening Earth.* Sumner Smith was fat, sleepy-eyed, close-mouthed. He was a man for whom Peter felt profound if cautious respect.

But his thoughts were not now concerned with the locally famous reporter, were not concerned, for the moment, even with himself. He was impressed by the spectacle of Hy Lowe standing treat, casually tossing out a five-dollar bank note; so much so that he promptly and with a grin accepted Hy's nod as an invitation and settled, after a moment's thoughtful consideration, on an old-fashioned whisky cocktail.

It was not that Hy was stingy; simply that the task of dressing well, taking in all the new shows and entertaining an apparently inexhaustible army of extraordinarily pretty girls with taxis and even occasional wine was at times too much for the forty-five a week that Hy earned.

Now, as it happened, while Peter thought about Hy, Hy was thinking about Peter. Not six times in the more than three years of his life with Peter and the Worm had Hy seen so jovial an expression on the long face of the well-known playwright.

The man was self-conscious to the point of morbidity. This at all times, dating far, far back of his painful relationship with Sue Wilde, back of his tempestuous affair with Grace Derring, back of the curious little mix-up with that Tonifetti girl. Lately he had been growing worse. Why, it was not yet a fortnight since he had fought Zanin, over at the Muscovy. Then Sue had broken their engagement, and Peter had left town a crushed and desperate man. Hy had gone to the trouble of worrying about him; an exertion which he was now inclined to resent a bit. He had even mentioned his fears to the Worm; which sage young man had smiled and observed dryly and enigmatically, "Peter will never really love anybody else." . . . And now, of all times, Peter was grinning!

The journalist left them to read *Le Sourire* and nibble toast in the corner room. Peter cheerfully regarded Hy's new homespun suit, his real Panama hat with a colored stripe in the white fluffy band, his flaming new tie and the silk shirt of exclusive pattern beneath it. Hy caught this scrutiny, and returned the grin.

"I'm in soft, Pete," he murmured. "Got a raise."

"Not out of old Wilde?"

Hy nodded. "Considerable story, my son. First the old boy fired me. That was at nine-thirty A. M. I went out and made a day of it. Then, of all things, the Worm comes into the office—"

"The Worm! Henry Bates?"

"Yep. He was on *The Courier,* you know."

"Was?"

"Was—and isn't. They sent him up with a stiff story about the missionary funds we've collected through the paper. And what does the old boy do but lock him out and holler through the transom that he'll eat poison, just like that, unless the Worm goes back and kills the story."

"And what does the Worm?"

"As per instructions."

"Kills the story?"

"And his job with it. He's writing a novel now —like everybody else. Have another," Hy added cheerfully, "on the old Walrus' partner in crime." Peter had another.

"The rest of it is"—this from Hy—"I come in at four-thirty that afternoon to pack up my things, and the Reverend Doctor Wilde hands me a raise. I get sixty now. I am on that famous road to wealth."

"But what on earth—"

Hy chuckled. "Worm says the old boy thought I knew."

"Ah!" breathed Peter. "Ah!"

"Can't say I wonder at Sue's leaving home, hitting out for the self-expression thing." Hy grew more expansive as the liquor spread its glowing warmth within his person. Otherwise he would hardly have spoken of Sue, even on the strength of that genial grin of Peter's.

Peter leaned an elbow on the mahogany bar and slowly sipped. "I wonder if Sue suspects this." It was not easy for him to speak her name. But he did speak it, with an apparent casualness worthy of Waters Coryell.

"Probably not. I've worked at his elbow for years and never dreamed." He sighed. "It's hard to see where a girl of any spirit gets off these days. From my experience with 'em, I'm convinced that home is the safest place for 'em, and yet it's only the dead ones that'll give up and stay there."

Peter did not reply. His brows were knit, but not, apparently, in concentration, for his eyes wandered. He said something about getting his bags over to the rooms; started irresolutely down the passage toward the barber shop; stopped; pressed

his fingers to his mouth; came back, passing Hy as if he didn't see him and went on out to the side street. Here he stopped again.

The side street was narrow. A cross-town car shut off most of his view of the Avenue, a few yards away. Then it passed, and he saw a young couple strolling across toward the restaurant. The man—large, heavy of hand and foot, a peasant-like face curiously lighted by burning eyes, better dressed than usual—was Jacob Zanin. The girl—slim, astonishingly fresh and pretty, not wearing the old tam o' shanter and haphazard costume he associated with her, but a simple light suit—was Sue Wilde; the girl who by her hardness and selfishness had hurt Peter irreparably. There they were, chatting casually, quite at ease—Zanin, who didn't believe in marriage, who had pursued Sue with amazing patience for nearly two years, who had wrecked Peter's pocket; Sue, who had broken his heart.

CHAPTER XXVII

PETER IS DRIVEN TO ACT

THE spectacle stopped Peter's brain. Among all the wild pictures that had rushed helter skelter through his overwrought mind of late there had been nothing like this. Why, it was only a matter of days since he and Zanin had pummeled each other to an accompaniment of broken chairs, overturned tables, wrecked china, torn clothing, actual blood. He had pictured Sue, a confused disillusioned girl, rushing back to her home; Zanin a marked man, even in the Village, cowering away from his fellows. But this!

They passed the corner. With a great gulp of sheer emotion Peter followed, almost running. They turned into the Parisian—but not into the familiar basement. Instead they mounted the wide front steps, as matter-of-fact as any two Upper West Siders out of a limousine. Peter pressed his hands to his eyes. He looked again. They had vanished within the building.

Peter walked back and forth. He told himself

that he must think. But the fact clear even to his overwhelmed consciousness was that he was not thinking and that there was no immediate prospect of his being able to think. He went a whole block up the side street, stemming the thick tide of Jewish working girls from University Place and the lower Broadway district and men in overalls—muttering aloud, catching himself, compressing his lips, then muttering again. "She played with me!" So ran the muttering. "She is utterly lacking in responsibility, in any sense of obligation. She lacks spirituality. That is it, she lacks spirituality. She has no fineness. She is hard—hard! She is drifting like a leaf on these crazy Village currents of irrepressible self-indulgence. I tried to save her—God knows I tried! I did my best! I can't be blamed if she goes to pieces now! I can do no more—I must let her go!" But even while he spoke he gulped again; his face, nearly gray now, twisting painfully. He suddenly turned and rushed back to the Parisian.

He paused at the side doorway and peered in. Hy was not in evidence. A later glance, from within the barroom, disclosed that slightly illuminated young man in the corner room of the restaurant hanging over the table at which the taciturn Sumner Smith was still trying to read *Le Sourire.*

Peter went on into the crooked passage, passed the open doors of two eating rooms where only the first early diners had as yet drifted in, found himself at the door of the barber shop, stopped short, then seeing the familiar figure of Maria Tonifetti approaching her table in the corner, dodged back and into the washroom. Here the boy named Anatole said, "Good evening, Meester Mann," and filled a basin for him. Peter dipped his hands into the warm water and washed them. He was surprised to find his forehead dripping with sweat. He dried his hands, removed his glasses and scrubbed his face. He turned on the cold water, wet a towel and pressed it to his temples and the back of his head, taking care not to wet his collar. His hands were trembling. And that impulse to talk aloud was rising uncontrollably. He went back to the corridor; stood motionless, breathing deeply; recalled with the force of an inspiration that Napoleon had feared nothing, not even the ladies with whose lives his own had become so painfully entangled and walked deliberately, staring straight before him, past that barber shop door.

At the foot of the crooked stairway he paused again. And again his face was twisting. "I've got to make the one more effort," he said. "It isn't for

myself, God knows! I gave her my love—I pledged her my life—I have suffered for her—I would have saved her if she had played fair! I've got to make this last effort!"

He mounted the stairs, crowded past the telephone booths, staring at them as he went. They conveyed a suggestion to his mind. He stepped cautiously to the restaurant door, nodded to the maître d'hôtel and glanced in. The nearer room was empty; but beyond the second doorway, Zanin's shoulder and profile were visible. Sue he could not see, but she must be sitting there. Yes, Zanin was leaning forward, was speaking, even smiling, in that offhand way of his!

Peter, flushing now, turned away; confronted the boy called Raoul; pressed a silver quarter into his palm. "Page, Miss Wilde," he breathed huskily. "Tell her she is wanted on the phone."

The boy named Raoul obeyed. At the Parisian it is not regarded as surprising that a gentleman should wish to speak to a lady.

Peter rushed around the turn and waited at the farther end of the row of booths.

Finally he heard her step.

When she saw him she stopped. "Oh," she said, "Peter!" And she frowned a very little.

"It was a deception," he broke out, "but I had to see you, Sue! I know you are with Zanin. I saw you come in. I don't see how you can do it, but we'll let that pass. I—"

"What is it, Peter? What do you want with me?"

"Oh, Sue! Are you as hard as that? What do I want of you! Good God! When I see you, after all I have suffered for your sake, plunging back into this life—taking up with that crook Zanin as if nothing had happened, as if— Why, he—"

Sue grew a little white about the mouth and temples. She glanced back at the empty passage.

"Peter," she said, curiously quiet, "if you think it fair to follow me into a public place, if you really mean to make another hideous scene, you will have to come into the dining-room to do it."

He reached out, caught her arm. She wrenched away and left him there. For a long moment he stared out the window at the rush of early evening traffic on the Avenue, his hands clenched at his sides. Then he hurried past the office and down to the street.

He stood on the curb and addressed a rattling autobus. "It is unbearable—unbelievable. The girl has lost all sense of the fitness of things. She is be-

side herself. I must act—act! I must act at once—to-night!"

People were passing. He turned, suddenly aware of the bustlingly unsympathetic world about him. Had any one heard his voice? Apparently none had. All were hurrying on, up-town, down-town. Standing there on the curb he could see in at the basement window. Sumner Smith was alone at last and deep in *Le Sourire*. Hy had drifted away—back to the bar, doubtless.

Peter, you recall, was a genius. As a genius he fed on his emotional reactions; they were his life. Therefore do not judge him too harshly for the wild thought that at this point rushed over his consciousness with a force that left him breathless. He was frightened and by himself. But there was a barbarous exaltation in his fear. "It'll bring her to her senses," he thought. "I've got to do it. Then she'll listen to me. She'll *have* to listen to me then."

Peter appeared in the corner room down-stairs, almost as curiously quiet as Sue had been in their brief talk. He, too, was rather pale. He came over to Sumner Smith's table, dropped down opposite the fat journalist, beckoned a waiter, ordered a light dinner, and, that done, proffered a cigarette.

"I've got a tip for you, Smith," he said, "a real

one. If *The Evening Earth* hasn't lost its vigor you can put it over big."

The fat man merely lighted his cigarette and looked inscrutably over it at Peter's drawn face.

"I can't give you the details. You'll have to take my word for them. Did you ever hear a question raised regarding the Reverend Doctor Wilde?"

Sumner Smith glanced out toward the bar and Hy. The corners of his mouth twitched. "His boss?"

"Right. Editor of *My Brother's Keeper*. Author of the famous missionary sermons."

"There was a little talk last year. You mean the big mission funds he has raised?"

Peter nodded. His eyes were overbright now.

"Nobody has the evidence, Mann. It isn't news as it stands."

"Suppose you could *make* it news—big news."

"Oh, of course—" the journalist gestured with his cigarette.

"Well, you can. To-night. Go straight to his house—over in Stuyvesant Square, not five minutes in a taxi, not ten on the cars—and ask him point-blank to consent to an accounting. Just ask him."

Sumner Smith mused. "It might be worth trying," he said.

"Take my word for it."

The journalist paid his check, rose, nodded to an acquaintance across the room, said: "I'll think it over, Mann. Much obliged—" and sauntered out.

This was unsatisfactory. Peter, crestfallen, forgot that Sumner Smith was hardened to sensations. And peering gloomily after the great reporter, he only half saw the man pause at the small desk near the bar, then speak casually to the now somewhat wobbly Hy Lowe; he only half heard a taxi pull up outside, a door slamming, the sudden grinding of gears as the taxi darted away. There were so many noises outside; you hardly noticed one more.

The waiter brought his dinner. He bolted it with unsteady hands. "I must think this all out," he told himself. "If Sumner Smith won't do it, one of the other *Earth* men will. Or some one on *The Morning Continental.*"

He lit a cigar, sat back and gazed out at the dim street where dimmer figures and vehicles moved forever by. It occurred to him that thus would a man sit and smoke and meditate who was moved by an overmastering love to enact a tremendous deed. But it was difficult to sustain the pose with his temples throbbing madly and a lump in his throat. His

heart, too, was skipping beats, he thought. Surreptitiously he felt his left wrist.

He beckoned the waiter; ordered paper and ink. The lump in his throat was suddenly almost a pain. He wrote—

"It was wrong of me, of course, Sue, dear. But I really must see you. Even though your hostile attitude makes it difficult to be myself. There is trouble impending. It concerns you vitally. If you will only hear me; meet me for half an hour after dinner, I know I can help you more than you dream.

"I am not speaking for myself but for you. In all this dreadful trouble between us, there is little I can ask of you. Only this—give me half an hour. I will wait down-stairs for an answer. P. E. M."

He sent this up-stairs. Then followed it as far as the telephones, called up his old acquaintance, Markham, of *The Morning Continental,* and whispered darkly to him over the wire.

As he ran down-stairs and dodged past the barber shop door, he became conscious that the dinner he had eaten felt now like a compact, insoluble ball in the region of his solar plexus. So he stopped at the bar and gulped a bicarbonate of soda while buying a highball for Hy Lowe whom he found confidentially informing the barkeeper of his raise from forty-five a week to sixty.

Then he resumed his seat by the window in the corner room; tried to find amusement in the pages of *Le Sourire;* failed; watched the door with wild eyes, starting up whenever a waiter entered the room, only to sink back limply at each fresh disappointment.

He wondered suddenly about Sumner Smith. What if he had followed the trail! This thought brought something like a chill. If he, Peter, an old newspaper man, were to be caught in the act of passing on an "exclusive" tip to friends on competing papers—violating the sacred basis of newspaper ethics! You couldn't tell about Smith. He rarely showed interest, never emotion, seldom even smiled. He would receive the news that Emperor William had declared himself King of All the Americas with that same impassive front.

Peter looked at his watch. It was twenty-five minutes of seven. He had thought it at least eight.

One thing was certain—he must get his bags out of that awful barber shop before it closed. Accordingly he had a messenger called to take them over to the rooms.

CHAPTER XXVIII

SUE DOES NOT SEND FOR PETER

THE familiar person of the Worm came in through the bar, stood in the doorway, looked about with quiet keen eyes—tall, carelessly dressed, sandy of hair but mild and reflective of countenance.

The Worm's eyes rested on Peter. He came across the room.

"Sit down," said Peter, smiling, his mouth a curving crack in a ghastly face.

"Oh," said the Worm, "you've heard?"

"Heard what?"

The Worm studied him a moment; then said, not without a touch of grave sympathy, "Tell me, Pete—do you happen to know where Sue is?"

Peter heard this; tried to steady himself and speak in the properly casual tone. He swallowed. Then the words rushed out—low, trembling, all bitterness: "She's up-stairs—with Zanin!"

The Worm turned away. Peter caught his arm.

"For God's sake!" he said. "What is it? What do you want of her? If anybody's got to tell her

anything, it'll be me!" And he pushed back his chair.

The Worm laid a strong hand on his shoulder, held him firmly down in the chair.

"Pete," he said—quiet, deliberate—"if you try to go up those stairs I myself will throw you down."

Peter struggled a little. "But—but—good God! Who do you think you are! You mean to say—" He stopped short, stared up at the Worm, swallowed again. Then, "I get you!" he said. "I get you! Like the damn fool I am, I never dreamed. So you're after her, too. You, with your books, your fine disinterestedness, your easy friendly ways—you're out for yourself, behind that bluff, just like the rest of us!"

The Worm glanced about the room. Neither had raised his voice. No one was giving them any particular attention. He relaxed his grip of Peter's arm; dropped into the chair opposite; leaned over the table on folded arms; fixed his rather compelling eyes on Peter's ashen face.

"Pete," he said, very quiet, very steady, "listen to me carefully. And don't spill any paranoia tonight. If you do—if you start anything like that crazy fight at the Muscovy—I'll take a hand myself. Now sit quiet and try to hear what I say."

Peter was still swallowing. The Worm went

steadily on. "A neighbor of the Wilde's just now called up the apartment. They thought they might get Hy Lowe to find Sue and fetch her home. But Hy—"

"He's—" began Peter.

"Yes, I saw him. He's outside here. He wants to sit on the curbstone and read the evening paper. A couple of chauffeurs were reasoning with him when I came in. I'm going to find her myself."

"But what's happened! You—"

"Her father has taken poison. They think he is dying. His wife went right to pieces. Everything a mess—and two young children. They hadn't even got the doctor in when this man telephoned. He thinks the old boy is gone."

"But—but—that's absurd! It couldn't act so quickly!"

The Worm stared; his face set perceptibly. "It has acted. He didn't take the bichloride route. He drank carbolic."

"But that—that's awful!"

"Yes, it's awful. There's a newspaper man there, raising hell. They can't get him out—or couldn't. Now keep this straight—if you go one step up those stairs or if you try to come out and speak to Sue before I get her away, I'll break your head."

"She'll send for me," said Peter, sputtering.

"Perhaps," observed Henry Bates; and swiftly left the room.

Sue Wilde returned from her brief interview with Peter. Two or three groups of early diners greeted her as she passed.

Jacob Zanin watched her—her brisk little nod and quiet smile for these acquaintances, her curiously boylike grace, the fresh tint of her olive skin. She was a bit thin, he thought; her hard work as principal actress in the Nature Film, coupled with the confusion he knew she had passed through during that brief wild engagement to Peter Mann, had worn her down.

She had always puzzled him. She puzzled him now, as she resumed her seat, met his gaze, said: "Jacob, give me a cigarette."

"Sue—you're off them."

"While the film job was on. Breaking training now, Jacob."

"Well," he mused aloud, "I made you stop for good reason enough. But now I'm not sure that you're not wise." And he tossed his box across the table.

While she lighted the cigarette, he studied her.

None knew better than he the interesting variety of girls who came to the Village to seek freedom—some on intense feministic principles (Sue among these), others in search of the nearly mythical country called Bohemia, still others in the knowledge that there they might walk unquestioned without the cap of good repute. There were cliques and cliques in the Village; but all were in agreement regarding a freedom for woman equal to the experimental freedom of man. Love was admitted as a need. The human race was frankly a welter of animals struggling upward in the long process of evolution—struggling wonderfully. Conventional morality was hypocrisy and therefore a vice. Frankness regarding all things, an open mind toward any astonishing new theory in the psychology of the human creature, the divine right of the ego to realize itself at all costs, a fine scorn for all proverbial wisdom, something near a horror of the home, the church, and the practical business world—a blend of these was the Village, to be summed up, perhaps, in Waters Coryell's languid remark: "I find it impossible to talk with any one who was born before 1880."

Zanin had known many women. In his own way he had loved not a few. With these he had been hard, but not dishonest. He was a

materialist, an anarchist, a self-exploiter, ambitious and unrestrained, torn within by the overmastering restlessness that was at once the great gift and the curse of his blood. He wanted always something else, something more. He was strong, fertile of mind, able. He had vision and could suffer. The companionship of a woman—here and there, now and then—meant much to him; but he demanded of her that she give as he would give, without sacrifice of work or self, without obligation. Nothing but what the Village terms "the free relation" was possible for Zanin. Within his peculiar emotional range he had never wanted a woman as he had wanted Sue. He had never given himself to another woman, in energy and companionship, as he had given himself to her.

She had eluded him. She had also eluded Peter. Zanin was capable of despising young women who talked freedom but were afraid to live it. There were such; right here in the Village there were such. But he did not think Sue's case so simple as that. He spoke out now:

"Been thinking you over, Sue."

She deposited the ash of her cigarette on a plate, glanced gravely up at him, then lowered her eyes again.

"Any result, Jacob?"

"You haven't found yourself."

'That's right," said she, "I haven't. Have you found me?"

He slowly shook his head. "I think you're doomed to grope for a while longer. I believe you have a good deal to find—more than some. You remember a while back when I urged you to take a trip with me?"

She did not lift her eyes at this; merely gazed thoughtfully down at her cigarette. He went on:

"I thought I could help you. I thought you needed love. It seemed to be the next thing for you."

"Yes," said she rather shortly—"you told me that."

"Well, I was wrong. Or my methods were. Something, I or some force, stirred you and to a bad result. You turned from me toward marriage. That plan was worse."

She seemed about to protest; looked up now, threw out her hands.

"At least," he pressed on, "as a plan, it didn't carry."

Her fine brows drew together perceptibly. "That's over, Jacob."

"All right." He settled back in his chair and looked about the long room. It was filling rapidly. There were long hair and flowing ties, evening suits, smart gowns, bright lights, gay talk in two tongues, and just now, music. "Tell me this much, Sue. What are you up to? There's no more Crossroads, no more Nature Film—lord, but that was a job! No more of that absurd engagement. This is why I dragged you out to-night. I'm wondering about you. What are you doing?"

"Jacob," she said, "I'm drifting."

"I heard you were trying to write."

"Trying—yes! A girl has to appear to be doing something."

"No plans at all, eh?"

She met this with silent assent.

Again he looked about the sprightly room; deliberately thinking. Once she glanced up at him; then waited.

"Sue," he said, "I think I see you a little more clearly. If I'm wrong, correct me. You have an unusual amount of strength—or something. I don't know what it is. I'll fall back on the safe old word, personality. You've got plenty of intelligence. And your stage work, your dancing—you're gifted as all get-out. But you're like clockwork, you're no good

unless your mainspring is working. You have to be wound up."

For the first time in this talk Sue's green-brown eyes lighted. She leaned over the table now and spoke with a flash of feeling.

"That's it, I believe," she said. "I've got to feel deeply—about something. I've got to have a religion."

"Exactly, Sue. There's a fanatical strain in you. You came into the Village life fresh from college with a whole set of brand-new enthusiasms. Fanatical enthusiasms. The attitude toward life that most of us take for granted—like it, feel it, just because it is us—you came at us like a wild young Columbus. You hadn't always believed it."

"I always resented parental authority," said she.

"Yes, I know. I'm not sure your revolt wasn't more a personal reaction than a social theory. They tried to tie you down. Your father—well, the less said about him the better. Preaching that old, old, false stuff, commercializing it, stifling your growth."

"Don't let's discuss him, Jacob."

"Very good. But the home was a conspiracy against you. His present wife isn't your mother, you told me once."

"No, she isn't my mother."

"Well"—he paused, thinking hard—"look here, Sue, what in thunder are you to do! You're no good without that mainspring, that faith."

She was silent, studying the table between them—silent, sober, not hostile. Life was not a joyous crusade; it was a grim dilemma. And an insistent pressure. She knew this now. The very admiration she felt for this strong man disarmed her in resisting him. He told the bald truth. She had fought him away once, only to involve herself with the impossible Peter; an experience that now left her the weaker before him. He knew this, of course. And he was a man to use every resource in getting what he wanted. There was little to object to in him, if you accepted him at all. And she had accepted him. As in a former crisis between them, he made her feel a coward.

"It brings me back to the old topic, Sue. I could help you, if you could let me. You have fought love down. You tried to compromise on marriage. Nothing in that. Better live your life, girl! You've got to keep on. You can't conceivably marry Peter; you can't drift along here without a spark alight in you, fighting life; you can't go back home, licked. God knows you can't do that! Give me a chance,

Sue. Try me. Stop this crazy resistance to your own vital needs. Damn it, be human!"

Sue, lips compressed, eyes misty, color rising a little, looked up, avoided Zanin's eyes; gazed as he had been doing, about the room. And coming in through the wide door she saw the long figure of Henry Bates, whom friends called the Worm. She watched him, compressing her lips a little more, knitting her brows, while he stood looking from table to table. His calm face, unassertive, reflective, whimsical in the slight squint of the eyes, was deeply reassuring. She was fond of Henry Bates.

He came across the room; greeted Zanin briefly; gripped Sue's hand.

"Sit down, Henry," said she.

He stood a moment, considering the two of them, then took the chair a waiter slid forward.

"I'm here on a curious mission, Sue," he said. She felt the touch of solemnity in his voice and gave him a quick glance. "I've been sent to find you."

"What"—said she, all nerves—"what has happened?"

"An accident. At your home, Sue. They believe that your father is dying. He has asked for you. It was a neighbor who called—a Mr. Deems—and

from what little he could tell me I should say that you are needed there."

Her hands moved nervously; she threw them out in the quick way she had and started to speak; then giving it up let them drop and pushed back her chair. For the moment she seemed to see neither man: her gaze went past them; her mouth twitched.

Zanin sat back, smoked, looked from one to the other. He was suddenly out of it. He had never known a home, in Russia or America. There was something between Henry Bates and Sue Wilde, a common race memory, a strain in their spiritual fiber that he did not share; something he could not even guess at. Whatever it was, he could see it gripping her, touching and rousing hidden depths. So much her face told him. He kept silent.

She turned to him now. "You'll excuse me, Jacob?" she said, very quiet.

"You're going, then?" said he. He was true to his creed. There was no touch of conventional sentiment in his voice. He had despised everything her father's life meant; he despised it now.

"Yes," she said, and nodded with sudden nervous energy—a rising color in her cheeks, her head erect, shoulders stiffened, a flash in her eyes—such a flash

as no one had seen there for a long time—"Yes, I'm going—home."

Zanin sat alone, looking after them as they walked quietly out of the restaurant. He lighted a fresh cigarette, deliberately blew out the match, stared at it as if it had been a live thing, then flicked it over his shoulder with a snap of his thumb.

CHAPTER XXIX

AT THE CORNER OF TENTH

PETER sat alone in the corner room downstairs. Mechanically he turned the pages of *Le Sourire*—turned them forward and back, tried to see what lay before his eyes, tried indeed, to appear as should appear that well-known playwright, "Eric" Mann. "I must think objectively," he told himself. "That's the great thing—to think objectively."

Time was passing—minutes, hours, years. He was trying to think out how long it had been since the Worm went up-stairs. "Was it one minute or ten?"

There was a sudden new noise outside—a voice. He listened intently. It was Hy Lowe's voice; excited, incoherent, shouting imprecations of some sort. Somebody ought to take Hy home. On any occasion short of the present crisis he would do it himself. Gradually the voice died down.

He heard the side-street door open and close.

Some one had entered the barroom. He tipped back and peered out there. He could see part of a bulky back, a familiarly bulky back. It moved over a little. It was the back of Sumner Smith.

Peter got up, turned, then stood irresolute. It was not, he told himself, that he was afraid of Sumner Smith, only that the mere sight of the man stirred uncomfortable and wild emotions within him.

The best way to get out, in fact the only way now, was through the adjoining room to the door under the front steps. Certainly he couldn't go up-stairs. There might be trouble on the Avenue if the Worm should see him coming out. For a moment he even considered swallowing down all this outrageous emotional upheaval within him and staying there. He had said that Sue would send for him. During ten or twelve seconds out of every sixty he firmly believed she would. It was so in his plays—let the heartless girl, in her heyday, jilt a worthy lover, she was sure in her hours of trial to flee, chastened, to his arms.

But he looked again at the back of Sumner Smith. It was a solid back. It suggested, like the man's inscrutable round face, quiet power. Peter decided on flight via that front door.

He moved slowly across the room. Then he heard a voice that chilled his hot blood.

"Mann," said this voice.

He turned. One or two men glanced up from their papers, then went on reading.

Peter stood wavering. Sumner Smith's eye was full on him from the barroom door; Sumner Smith's head was beckoning him with a jerk. He went.

"What'll you have?" he asked hurriedly, in the barroom.

"What'll I have?" mimicked Sumner Smith in a voice of rumbling calm. "You're good, Mann. But if anybody was to buy, it'd be me. The joke, you see, is on me. Only nobody's buying at the moment. You send me out—an *Evening Earth* man!—to pull off a murder for the morning papers. Oh, it's good! I grant you, it's good. I do your little murder; the morning papers get the story. Just to make sure of it you send Jimmie Markham around after me. It's all right, Mann. I've done your murder. *The Continental's* getting the story now—a marvel of a story. There's a page in it for them to-morrow. As for you—I don't know what you are. And I don't care to soil any of the words I know by putting 'em on you!"

Even Peter now caught the rumble beneath the calm surface of that voice. And he knew it was perhaps the longest speech of Sumner Smith's eventful life. Peter's stomach, heart, lungs and spine seemed to drop out of his body, leaving a cold hollow frame that could hardly be strong enough to support his shoulders and head. But he drew himself up and replied with some dignity in a voice that was huskier and higher than his own:

"I can't match you in insults, Smith. I appear to have a choice between leaving you and striking you. I shall leave you."

"The choice is yours," said Smith. "Either you say."

"I shall leave you," repeated Peter; and walked, very erect, out to the side street.

Here, near the corner of the Avenue, he found Hy Lowe, leaning against the building, weeping, while four taxi chauffeurs and two victoria drivers stood by. It occurred to Peter that it might be best, after all, to give up brooding over his own troubles and take the boy home. He could bundle him into a taxi. And once at the old apartment building in the Square, John the night man would help carry him up. It would be rather decent, for that mat-

ter, to pay for the taxi just as if it was a matter of course and never mention it to Hy. Of course, however, if Hy were to remember the occurrence—

A fist landed in Peter's face—not a hard fist, merely a limp, folded-over hand. Peter brushed it aside. It was the fist of Hy Lowe. Hy lurched at him now, caught his shoulders, tried to shake him. He was saying things in a rapidly rising voice. After a moment of ineffectual wrestling, Peter began to catch what these things were:

"Call you'self frien'—take bread outa man's mouth! Oh, I know. No good tryin' lie to me—tellin' me Sumner Smith don' know what he's talkin'! Where's my raise? You jes' tell me—where's my raise? Ol' Walrus gone—croaked—where's my raise?"

Peter propped him against the building and walked swiftly around the corner.

There he stopped; dodged behind a tree.

Sue and the Worm were running down the wide front steps. She leaped into the first taxi. The Worm stood, one foot on the step, hand on door, and called. One of Hy's audience hurried around, brushing past Peter, receiving his instructions as he cranked the engine and leaped to his seat. The door slammed. They were gone.

Peter was sure that something snapped in his brain. It was probably a lesion, he thought. He strode blindly, madly, up the Avenue, crowding past the other pedestrians, bumping into one man and rushing on without a word.

Suddenly—this was a little farther up the Avenue—Peter stopped short, caught his breath, struggled with emotions that even he would have thought mixed. He even turned and walked back a short way. For across the street, back in the shadow of the corner building, his eyes made out the figure of a girl; and he knew that figure, knew the slight droop of the shoulders and the poise of the head.

She had seen him, of course. Yes, this was Tenth Street! With swift presence of mind he stooped and went through the motion of picking up something from the sidewalk. This covered his brief retreat. He advanced now.

She hung back in the shadow of the building. Her dark pretty face was clouded with anger, her breast rose and fell quickly with her breathing. She would not look at him.

He took her arm—her softly rounded arm—in his hand. She wrenched it away.

"Oh, come, Maria, dear," he murmured rather weakly. "I'm sorry I kept you waiting."

She confronted him now. There was passion in her big eyes. Her voice was not under control.

"Why don't you tell the truth?" she broke out. "You think you can do anything with me—play with me, hurt me."

"Hush, Maria!" He caught her arm again. "Some one will hear you!"

"Why should I care? Do you think I don't know—"

"Child, I don't know what on earth you mean!"

"You do know! You play with me! You sent for your bags. Why didn't you come yourself?"

"Why, that—"

"When you saw me here you stopped—you went back—"

Peter gulped. "I dropped my keys," he cried eagerly. "I was swinging them. I had to go back and pick them up." And triumphantly, with his free hand, he produced them from his pocket.

Within the grip of his other hand he felt her soft arm tremble a little. Her gaze drooped.

"It isn't just to-night—" he heard her trying to say.

"Come, dear, here's a bus! We'll ride up-town."

She let him lead her to the curb. Solicitously he

handed her up the winding little stairway to a seat on the roof.

There is no one book of Peter's life. There are a great many little books, some of them apparently unconnected with any of the others. Maria Tonifetti, as you may gather from this unintelligible little scene on a street corner, had one of those detached Peter books all to herself.

Up on the roof of the bus, Peter, reacting with great inner excitement from his experiences of the last three hours, slipped an arm about Maria's shoulders, bent tenderly over her, whispered softly into her ear. Before the bus reached Forty-second Street he had the satisfaction of feeling her nestle softly and comfortably against his arm, and he knew that once again he had won her. Slowly within his battered spirit the old thrill of conquest stirred and flamed up into a warm glow. . . .

CHAPTER XXX

FIFTY MINUTES FROM BROADWAY

THE Worm sat on a wooden chair, an expression of puzzled gravity on his usually whimsical face. The room was a small kitchen. The two screened windows gave a view of a suburban yard, bounded by an alley and beyond the alley other yards; beyond these a row of small frame houses. There were trees; and the scent of a honeysuckle vine.

Sue Wilde, her slim person enveloped in a checked apron, knelt by the old-fashioned coal range. The lower door was open, the ash-pan drawn half out. There were ashes on the floor about her knees.

Henry Bates absently drew out his old caked brier pipe; filled and lighted it. Meditatively he studied the girl—her apron, the flush on her face, the fascinating lights in her tousled hair—telling himself that the scene was real, that the young rebel soul he had known in the Village was this same Sue

Wilde. The scent of the honeysuckle floated thickly to his nostrils. He stared out at the row of little wooden houses. He slowly shook his head; and his teeth closed hard on the pipe stem.

"Henry," she cried softly, throwing out her fine hands, "don't you understand! I had a conscience all the time. That's what was the matter!"

"I think I understand well enough, Sue," said he. "It's the"—he looked again about the kitchen and out the window—"it's the setting! I hadn't pictured you as swinging so far to this extreme. Though, as you know, there in the Village, I have been rather conservative in my feelings about you."

"I know, Henry." She settled back on her heels. He saw how subdued she was. The tears were not far from her eyes. "I've been all wrong."

"Wrong, Sue?"

"Absolutely. In all I said and tried to do in the Village." He was shaking his head; but she continued: "I was cutting at the roots of my own life. I disowned every spiritual obligation. I put my faith in Nietzsche and the Russian crowd, in egotism. Henry"—her eyes unmistakably filled now; her voice grew unsteady—"once my father came over into the Village after me. He tried to get me to come home. I was playing at the Crossroads then."

"Yes," said he shortly, "I remember that time."

"I had on my boy costume. He came straight to the theater and I had to go out front and talk with him. We quarreled—"

"I know," said he quickly, "I was there."

He saw that she was in the grip of an emotional revulsion and wished he could stop her. But he couldn't. Suddenly she seemed like a little girl.

"Don't you see, Henry!" She threw out her hands. "Do you think it would be any good—now —to tell me I'm not partly responsible. If I—if —" she caught herself, stiffened up; there was a touch of her old downrightness in the way she came out with, "Henry, he wouldn't have—killed himself!" Her voice was a whisper. "He wouldn't!"

The Worm smoked and smoked. He couldn't tell her that he regarded her father as a hypocritical old crook, and that her early revolt against the home within which the man had always wished to confine her had, as he saw it, grown out of a sound instinct. You couldn't expect her, now, to get all that into any sort of perspective. Her revolt dated back to her girlish struggle to get away to school and later, to college. Sue was forgetting now how much of this old story she had let him see in their many talks. Why, old Wilde had tried to change the

course of her college studies to head her away from modernism into the safer channels of pietistic tradition. The Worm couldn't forgive him for that. And then, the man's dreadful weekly, and his curious gift of using his great emotional power to draw immense sums of money from thousands of faithful readers in small towns and along country lanes. He hadn't killed himself on Sue's account.

It was known, now, that the man had lived in an awful fear. It was known that he had the acid right at hand in both office and home, the acid he had finally drunk. . . . She was speaking.

The Worm smoked on.

"I wonder if you really know what happened."

"What happened?" he repeated, all at sea.

"You must have seen the drift of it—of what I didn't tell you at one time or another." He saw now that she was talking of her own experiences. He had to make a conscious struggle to bring his mind up out of those ugly depths and listen to her. She went on. "It has been fine, Henry, the way I could always talk to you. Our friendship—"

She began in another way. "It's the one thing I owe to Jacob Zanin. He told me the blunt truth —about myself. It did hurt, Henry. But even then I knew it for the truth. . . . You know how

he feels about marriage and the home"—she glanced up at the bare kitchen walls—"all that."

He nodded.

"Well, he—Henry, he wanted to have an affair with me." She said this rather hurriedly and low, not at all with the familiar frankness of the Village in discussing the old forbidden topics. "He knew I was all confused, that I had got into an impasse. He made me see that I'd been talking and thinking a kind of freedom that I hadn't the courage to go in for, really—in living."

"Courage, Sue?"

"Yes, courage—or taste—or something! Henry, you know as well as I that the freedom we talk in the Village leads straight to—well, to complete unmorality, to—to promiscuity, to anything."

"Perhaps," said he, watching her and wondering with a little glow suddenly warming his heart, at her lack of guile. He thought of a phrase he had once formulated while hearing this girl talk—"Whom among women the gods would destroy they first make honest."

"When I was put to the test—and I *was* put to the test, Henry; I found that I was caught in my own philosophy, was drifting down with it—it turned out that I simply didn't believe the things I'd been

saying. I even"—she faltered here, but rushed on —"I very nearly rushed into a crazy marriage with Peter. Just to save myself. Oh, I see it now! It would have been as dishonest a marriage as the French-heeledest little suburbanite ever planned."

"You're severe with yourself," he said.

She, lips compressed, shook her head.

"I suppose," he mused aloud, "there's a lot of us radicals who'd be painfully put to it if we were suddenly called on to quit talking and begin really living it out. Lord, what would we do!" And mentally he added: "Damn few of us would make the honest effort to find ourselves that you're making right now." Then, aloud: "What are you going to do?"

She dropped her eyes. "I'm going to take these ashes down cellar."

"I'll do that," said he.

When the small task was accomplished, she said more gently:

"Henry, please understand! I count on you. This thing is a tragedy. I'm deep in it. I don't even want to escape it. I'll try not to sink into those morbid thoughts—but he was my father, and he was buried yesterday. His wife, this one, is not my mother, but—but she was his wife. She is crushed,

Henry. I have never before been close to a human being who was shattered as she is shattered. There are the children—two of them. And no money."

"No money?"

"Father's creditors have seized the paper and the house in Stuyvesant Square. Everything is tied up. There is to be an investigation. My Aunt Matilda is here—this is her house—but we can't ask her to support us. Henry, here is something you can do! Betty is staying at my old rooms. Try to see her to-day. Could you?"

He nodded. "Surely."

"Have her get some one to come in with her—take the place off my hands. Every cent of the little I have is needed here. She'll be staying. That marriage of hers didn't work. She couldn't keep away from the Village, anyway. And please have her pack up my things and send them out. I only brought a hand-bag. Betty will pitch in and do that for me. She's got to. I haven't even paid this month's rent yet. Have her send everything except my books—perhaps she could sell those. It would help a little."

They heard a step on the uncarpeted back stairs. A door swung open. On the bottom step, framed in the shadowed doorway, stood a short round-shoul-

dered woman. Lines drooped downward from her curving mouth. Her colorless eyes shifted questioningly from the girl to the man and back to the girl again. It was an unimaginative face, rather grim, telling its own story of fifty-odd years of devotion to petty household and neighborhood duties; the face of a woman all of whose girlhood impulses had been suppressed until they were converted into perverse resentments.

The Worm, as he rose, hardly aware of the act, knocked the ashes from his pipe into the coal hod. Then he saw that her eyes were on those ashes and on his pipe. He thrust the pipe into his pocket. And glancing from the woman to the girl, he momentarily held his breath at the contrast and the thoughts it raised. It was youth and crabbed age. The gulf between them was unbridgeable, of course; but he wondered—it was a new thought—if age need be crabbed. Didn't the new spirit of freedom, after all, have as much to contribute to life, as the puritan tradition? Were the risks of letting yourself go any greater, after all, than the risks of suppression? Weren't the pseudo-Freudians at least partly right?

"Aunt Matilda," Sue was saying (on her feet now)—"this is an old friend, Mr. Bates."

The woman inclined her head.

Henry Bates, his moment of speculation past, felt his spirit sinking. He said nothing, because he could think of nothing that could be said to a woman who looked like that. She brought with her the close air of the stricken chamber at the top of the stairs. By merely opening the door and appearing there she had thrust a powerful element of hostility into the simple little kitchen. Her uncompromising eyes drew Sue within the tragic atmosphere of the house as effectively and definitely as it thrust himself without it.

Sue's next remark was even more illuminating than had been his own curious haste to conceal his pipe.

"Oh," murmured Sue, "have we disturbed"—she hesitated, fought with herself, came out with it—"mother?"

"Well, the smoke annoys her." Aunt Matilda did not add the word "naturally," but the tone and look conveyed it. "And she can hear your voices."

Henry Bates had to struggle with a rising anger. There were implications in that queerly hostile look that reflected on Sue as on himself. But they were and remained unspoken. They could not be met.

The only possible course was to go; and to go with the miserable feeling that he was surrendering Sue to the enemy.

He turned to her now, speaking with quiet dignity; little realizing that even this dignity aroused resentment and suspicion in the unreceptive mind behind those eyes on the stairs—that it looked brazen coming from a young man whose sandy hair straggled down over his ears and close to his suspiciously soft collar, whose clothes were old and wrinkled, whose mild studious countenance exhibited nothing of the vigor and the respect for conformity that are expected of young men in suburbs who must go in every morning on the seven-thirty-six and come out every evening on the five-fifty-two, and who, therefore, would naturally be classed with such queer folk as gipsies and actors.

"If you like, Sue," he said, "I'll get Betty to hurry so I can bring a suit-case out to-night."

She waited a brief moment before answering; and in that moment was swept finally within Aunt Matilda's lines. "Oh, no," she said, speaking with sudden rapidity, "don't do that. To-morrow will do—just send them."

Then aware that she was dismissing him indef-

initely, her eyes brimming again (for he had been a good friend), she extended her hand.

The Worm gripped it, bowed to the forbidding figure on the stairs and left.

CHAPTER XXXI

A PAIR OF RED BOOTS

THE pleasant days of quiet reading and whimsical reflection were over for the Worm, poor devil! Life caught him up without warning—that complex fascinating life of which he had long been a spectator—and swept him into swift deep currents. He was to be a mere spectator no longer.

Washington Square glowed with June. The trees had not yet assumed the faded, dispirited gray-green of midsummer. The bus tops were crowded with pleasure riders, and a crowd of them pressed about the open-air terminal station held in check by uniformed guards. On the wide curves of asphalt hundreds of small Italians danced to the hurdy-gurdy or played hopscotch or roller-skated. Perambulators lined the shady walks; nurses, slim and uniformed, fat and ununiformed, lined the benches. Students hurried west, south and north (for it was afternoon—Saturday afternoon, as it happened). Beggars, pedlers, lovers in pairs, unkempt tenement dwellers, a policeman or two, moved slowly about,

but not so slowly as they would move a few weeks later when the heat of July would have sapped the vitality of every living thing in town.

But the Worm, standing near the marble arch where Fifth Avenue splendidly begins, felt not June in his heart. He walked on through the Square to the old red-brick building where for three years he and Hy Lowe and Peter Ericson Mann had dwelt in bachelor comfort. The dingy studio apartment on the seventh floor had been his home. But it was a haunt of discord now.

He found the usually effervescent Hy pacing the lower hall like a leopard in a cage. Hy wore an immaculately pressed suit of creamy gray flannel, new red tie, red silk hosiery visible above the glistening low-cut tan shoes, a Panama hat with a fluffy striped band around it. In his hand was a thin bamboo stick which he was swinging savagely against his legs. His face worked with anger.

He pounced upon the Worm.

"Wanted to see you," he said in a voice that was low but of quavering intensity. "Before I go. Got to run."

At this point the elevator came creaking down. A messenger boy stepped out, carrying Hy's suit-case and light overcoat.

"Excuse me," breathed Hy, "one minute." He whispered to the boy, pressed a folded dollar bill into his hand, hurried him off. "This thing has become flatly impossible—"

"What thing?" The Worm was moodily surveying him.

"Pete. He's up there now. I'm through. I shan't go into those rooms again if he—look here! I've found a place for you and me, over in the Mews. Eight dollars less than this and more light. Tell Pete. I can't talk to him. My God, the man's a—"

"He's a what?" asked the Worm.

"Well, you know what he *did!* As there's a God in the Heavens he killed old Wilde."

"Killed your aunt!" observed the Worm, and soberly considered his friend. Hy's elaborate get-up suggested the ladies, a particular lady. The Worm looked him over again from the fluff-bound Panama to the red silk socks. A very particular lady! And he was speaking with wandering eyes and an unreal sort of emphasis; as if his anger, though doubtless genuine enough, were confused with some other emotion regarding which he was not explicit.

"Where are you going now—over to the Mews?"

Hy started at the abrupt question, took the Worm's elbow, became suddenly confidential.

"No," he said, "not exactly. You see—everything's gone to smash. The creditors of the paper won't keep me on. They'll put in a country preacher with a string tie, and he'll bring his own staff. That's what Pete's done to me! That's what he's done. I wouldn't go off this way, right now, if it wasn't for the awful depression I feel. I didn't sleep a wink last night. Honest, not a wink! A man's got to have *some* sympathy in his life. Damn it, in a crisis like this—"

"Perhaps you can tell me with even greater lucidity when you are coming back," said the Worm dryly.

Hy gulped, stared blankly at his friend, uttered explosively the one word, "Monday!" Then he glanced at his watch and hurried out of the building.

The Worm slowly shook his head and took the elevator.

The long dim studio was quite as usual, with its soft-toned walls, dilapidated but comfortable furniture, Hy's piano, the decrepit flat-top desk, the two front windows from which you could see all of the Square and the mile of roofs beyond it, and still beyond, the heights of New Jersey. The coffee

percolator stood on the bookcase—on the empty bookcase where once had been the Worm's library. In this room he had studied and written the hundreds of futile book reviews that nobody ever heard of, that had got him precisely nowhere. In this room he had lived in a state of soul near serenity until he met Sue Wilde. Now it brought heartache. Merely to push open the door and step within was to stir poignantly haunting memories of a day that was sharply gone. It was like opening old letters. The scent of a thoughtlessly happy past was faintly there.

Something else was there—a human object, sprawled abjectly in the Morris chair, garbed in slippers and bathrobe, hair disheveled, but black-rimmed eye-glasses still on his nose, the conspicuous black ribbon still hanging from them down the long face. It was that well-known playwright, Peter Ericson Mann, author of *The Buzzard, Odd Change* and *Anchored;* and, more recently, of the scenario for Jacob Zanin's Nature film. Author, too, of the new satirical comedy, *The Truffler,* written at Sue Wilde and booked for production in September at the Astoria Theater.

The Worm had not told Hy that he had just seen Sue. Now, standing motionless, the thousand mem-

ory-threads that bound the old rooms to his heart clinging there like leafless ivy, he looked down at the white-faced man in the Morris chair and knew that he was even less likely to mention the fact to Peter. He thought—"Why, we're not friends! That's what it means!"

Peter's hollow eyes were on him.

"You, Worm!" he said huskily, and tried to smile. "I'm rather ill, I think. It's shock. You know a shock can do it."

"What shocked you?" asked Henry Bates rather shortly, turning to the window.

"Hy. He's crazy, I think. It's the only possible explanation. He said I was a"—Peter's expressive voice dropped, more huskily still, into the tragic mood—"a murderer. It was a frightful experience. The boy has gone batty. It's his fear of losing his job, of course. But the experience has had a curious effect on me. My heart is palpitating." His right hand was feeling for the pulse in his left wrist. "And I have some difficulty in breathing." Now he pressed both hands to his chest.

The Worm stared out the window. Peter would act until his dying day; even then. One pose would follow another, prompted by the unstable emotions of genius, guided only by an egotism so strong that

it would almost certainly weather every storm of brain or soul. In a very indirect way Pete had murdered the old boy. No getting around that. An odd sort of murder—sending Sumner Smith to ask that question. Peter himself, away down under his egotism, knew it. Hence the play for sympathy.

Peter was still talking. "It really came out of a clear sky. Until very lately I should have said that Hy and I were friends. As you know, we had many points of contact. Last fall, when—"

The Worm turned. "Passing lightly over the next eight months," he remarked, "what do you propose to do now?"

Peter shrank back a little. The Worm's manner was hardly ingratiating. "Why—" he said, "why, I suppose I'll stay on here. You and I have always got on, Henry. We've been comfortable here. And to tell the truth, I've been getting tired of listening to the history in detail of Hy's amours. He wants to look out, that fellow. He's had a few too many of 'em. He's getting careless. Now you and I, we're both sober, quiet. We were the backbone of the Seventh-Story Men. We can go on—"

The Worm, though given to dry and sometimes cryptic ways, was never rude. That is he never had been. But at this point he walked out of the

apartment and closed the door behind him. He had come in with the intention of using the telephone. Instead now he walked swiftly through the Square and on across Sixth Avenue, under the elevated road into Greenwich Village, where the streets twist curiously, and the hopeless poor swarm in the little triangular parks, and writers and painters and sculptors and agitators and idea-venders swarm in the quaint tumble-down old houses and the less quaint apartment buildings.

He entered one of the latter, pressed one of a row of buttons under a row of brass mouthpieces. The door clicked. He opened it; walked through to the rear door on the right.

This door opened slowly, disclosing a tall young woman, very light in coloring, of a softly curving outline, seeming to bend and sway even as she stood quietly there; charming to the eye even in the half-light, fresh of skin, slow, non-committal in speech and of quietly yielding ways; a young woman with large, almost beautiful, inexpressive eyes. She wore hat and gloves and carried a light coat.

"You just caught me," she said.

On the floor by the wall was a hand-bag. Henry Bates eyed this. "Oh," he murmured, distrait, "going away!"

"Why—yes. You wanted me?"

"Yes. It's about Sue Wilde."

She hesitated; then led him into the half-furnished living-room.

"Where is Sue, anyway?"

"When I left her she was trying to make a fire in a kitchen range. Out in Jersey."

"But what on earth—"

"Trouble was she didn't understand about the damper in the pipe. I fixed that."

Betty glanced covertly at her wrist watch. "I don't want to appear unsympathetic," she said, "but I don't see why she undertakes to shoulder that family. It's—it's quixotic. It's not her sort of thing. She's got her own life to live."

The Worm, very calm but a little white about the mouth, confronted her. Betty moved restlessly.

"She wants you to pack up her things," he said. "Sent me to ask."

Betty knit her brows. "Oh," she murmured, "isn't that too bad. I really haven't a minute. You see—it's a matter of catching a train. I could do it Monday. Or you might call up one of the other girls. I'm awfully sorry. But it's something very important." Her eyes avoided his. Her color rose a little. She turned away. "Of course," she was

murmuring, "I hate terribly to fail Sue at a time like this—"

She moved irresolutely toward the little hall, glanced again at her watch; and suddenly in confusion picked up her bag and hurried out.

He could hear her light step in the outer corridor; then the street door. All at sea, he started to follow. At the apartment door he paused. Her key was in the lock; she had not even thought to take it. He removed it, put it in his pocket; then wandered back into the living-room and stood over the telephone, trying to think of some one he could call in. But his rising resentment made clear thinking difficult. He sank into the armchair, crossed his long legs, clasped his hands behind his head, stared at the mantel. On it were Sue's books, in a haphazard row—a few Russian novels (in English translations), Havelock Ellis's *Sex in Relation to Society, Freud on Psychanalysis and Dreams,* two volumes of Schnitzler's plays, Brieux's plays with the Shaw preface, a few others.

His gaze roved from the books to the bare walls. They *were* bare; all Sue's pictures were pinned up on the burlap screen that hid a corner of the room—half a dozen feminist cartoons from *The Masses,* a futuristic impression of her own head

by one of the Village artists, two or three strong rough sketches by Jacob Zanin of costumes for a playlet at the Crossroads, an English lithograph of Mrs. Pankhurst.

Henry Bates slowly, thoughtfully, filled and lighted his pipe. His brows were knit. The room, in its unfeminine bareness as well as in its pictures and books, breathed of the modern unsubmissive girl. No one had wasted a minute here on "housekeeping." Here had lived the young woman who, more, perhaps, than any other of the recent lights of the old Village, had typified revolt. She had believed, like the Village about her, not in patriotism but in internationalism, not in the home but in the individual, not in duty and submission, but in experiment and self-expression. Already, like all the older faiths of men, this new religion had its cant, its intolerance of opposition, its orthodoxy. His pipe went out while he sat there thinking about it; the beginnings of the summer twilight softened the harsh room and dimmed the outlines of back fences and rear walls without the not overclean windows.

Finally he got up, turned on the lights, took off his coat, found Sue's trunk behind the burlap screen and dragged it to the middle of the room. He began with the coverings of the couch-bed; then went

into the bedroom and folded blankets, coverlet, sheets and comforter. Sue did not own a great variety of clothing; but what was hanging in the closet he brought out, folded and packed away. He took down the few pictures and laid them flat within the upper tray of the trunk. In an hour living-room, bedroom and closet were bare. The books he piled by the door; first guessing at the original cost of each and adding the figures in his head.

Nothing remained but the bureau in the bedroom. He stood before this a long moment before he could bring himself to open the top drawer. To Peter, to Zanin, to Hy Lowe, the matter would have been simple. Years back those deeply experienced young bachelors had become familiar with all manner of little feminine mysteries; but to Henry Bates these were mysteries still. The color came hotly to his mild countenance; his pulses beat faster and faster. He recalled with painful vividness, the last occasion on which Reason, normally his God, had deserted him. That was the day, not so long ago by the calendar, he had turned against all that had been his life—dropped his books in the North River, donned the costly new suit that Peter's tailor had made for him and set forth to propose marriage to Sue Wilde. And with chagrin that grew and burned his face to

a hotter red he recalled that he had never succeeded in making himself clear to her. To this day she did not know that his reflective, emotionally unsophisticated heart had been torn with love of her. Why, blindly urging marriage, he had actually talked her into that foolish engagement with Peter! . . . What was the quality that enabled men to advance themselves—in work, in love? Whatever it might be, he felt he had it not. Peter had it. Zanin had it. Hy had it. Sue herself! Each was a person, something of a force, a positive quality in life. But he, Henry Bates, was a negative thing. For years he had sat quietly among his books, content to watch others forge past him and disappear up the narrow lanes of progress. Until now, at thirty-two, he found himself a hesitant unfruitful man without the gift of success.

"It is a gift," he said aloud; and then sat on the springs of the stripped bed and stared at his ineffectual face in the mirror. "The trouble with me," he continued, "is plain lack of character. Better Hy's trifling conquests; better Zanin's driving instinct to get first; better Peter's hideously ungoverned ego; than—nothing!"

His pipe usually helped. He felt for it. It was not in the right-hand coat pocket where he always

carried it. Which fact startled him. Then he found it in the left-hand pocket. Not once in ten years before this bitter hour had he misplaced his pipe. "My God," he muttered, "haven't I even got any *habits!*" He was unnerved. "Like Pete," he thought, "but without even Pete's excuse."

He lighted his pipe, puffed a moment, stood erect, drew a few deep breaths, then drove himself at the task of packing the things that were in the bureau. And a task it was! Nothing but the strong if latent will of the man held him to it. There were soft white garments the like of which his hands had never touched before. Reverently, if grimly, he laid them away in the upper trays of the trunk. In the bottom drawer were Sue's dancing costumes—Russian and Greek. Each one of these brought a vivid picture of the girl as she had appeared at the Crossroads; each was a stab at Henry Bates' heart. At the bottom, in the corner, were a pair of red leather boots, very light, with metal clicks in the heels. He took them up, stood motionless holding them. His eyes filled. He could see her again, in that difficult crouching Russian step—her costume sparkling with color, her olive skin tinted rose with the spirited exercise of it, her extraordinary green eyes dancing with the exuberant life that was in her. Then, as

if by a trick shift of scene, he saw her in a bare kitchen, wearing a checked apron, kneeling by a stove. The tears brimmed over. He lifted the little red boots, stared wildly at them, kissed them over and over.

"My God!" he moaned softly, "oh, my God!"

There was a faint smell of burning. His pipe lay at his feet, sparks had fallen out and were eating their way into the matting. He stepped on them; then picked up the pipe and resolutely lighted it again. The boots he carried into the living-room; found an old newspaper and wrapped them up; laid the parcel by his hat and coat in the hall.

He found a strap in the kitchen closet and strapped the trunk. There was a suit-case that he had filled; he closed this and laid it on the trunk. Then he turned all the lights off and stood looking out the open window. He had had no dinner—couldn't conceivably eat any. It was evening now; somewhere between eight and nine o'clock, probably. He didn't care. Nothing mattered, beyond getting trunk and suit-case off to Sue before too late—so that she would surely have them in the morning. The sounds of evening in the city floated to his ears; and he realized that he had not before been hearing them. From an apartment across the area

came the song of a talking machine. Blowsy women leaned out of rear windows and visited. There was a faint tinkle from a mechanical piano in the corner saloon. He could hear a street-car going by on Tenth Street.

Then another sound—steps in the corridor; the turning of a knob; fumbling at the apartment door.

He started like a guilty man. In the Village, it was nothing for a man to be in a girl's rooms or a girl in a man's. The group was too well emancipated for that—in theory, at least. In fact, of course, difficulties often arose—and gossip. Great-hearted phrases were the common tender of Village talk; but not all the talkers were great-hearted. And women suffered while they smiled. He would have preferred not to be found there.

A key grated. The door opened.

With a shrinking at his heart, a sudden great self-consciousness, he stepped into the hall.

It was Sue—in her old street suit.

CHAPTER XXXII

CHAPTER ONE

SUE stared at him, caught her breath, laughed a little.

"Why—Henry! You startled me. Where's Betty?"

The Worm, thinking quickly, bitterness in his heart against the selfish lightness of the Village, lied. "Haven't seen her. Waited for her to come in. Finally decided I'd better not wait any longer."

They were in the dim living-room now. Sue's eyes took in the strapped trunk and closed suit-case, the bare screen and couch.

"But who—Henry, you don't mean that you—"

He nodded. His pipe was out—he simply couldn't keep it going! Still, it gave him something to do, lighting it again.

Sue stood watching him, studying his face by the light of a match reflected from his hollowed hands.

"Why so dark in here?" she observed. Then,

abruptly, she came to him, laid a hand on his arm, broke out with feeling: "You're a dear, Henry, to go to all this trouble! As it was, I felt I was imposing on you. So I ran in to look after things myself."

"Going back to-night?" he asked, talking around his pipe-stem.

"Oh, yes. I must." She moved to the window and gazed out at the crowded familiar scene. Suddenly she turned.

"Henry—didn't you see Betty?"

"No," he muttered.

"Then how on earth did you get in? There are only the two keys."

He lowered his pipe, stared at her with open mouth. As soon as his mind cleared a little he thought—"Good God! I don't even lie well! I'm no good—for anything!"

He turned with a jerk; walked down the room; walked back again; striding out savagely, turning with a jerk.

"What is it you aren't telling me?" she asked, following him with troubled eyes.

He paced and paced. Finally he came to the other side of the window, stared gloomily out. Still she watched him, waiting.

"Sue," he said—she had never known this vehemence in him—"you're wrong."

"Wrong, Henry?"

He threw out his arm in a strong gesture; his fist was clenched. The other hand held his pipe high. "Yes, wrong! You're not a cook! You're not a nurse maid. You're a girl with a soul—with spirit—fire! What are you to that family? They've always wanted to hold you down—yes. But why? For fear you'd start talk and make them uncomfortable. Oh, I know the feeling that has gripped you now. It's a big reaction. The tragedy of your father's death has brought your childhood back—the old tribal teachings—duty—self-sacrifice! The rush of it has swept your reason aside. But it will come back. It's got to, girl! Even if you have to take a long time working through to it. You and your father were not friends. Denying your own life won't help him. Your emotions are stirred. I know. But even if they are, for God's sake don't stop thinking! Keep your head! I tell you, you've got to go on. You can't live some one else's life—got to live your own! It's all you've got to live—that life—your gifts—"

He stopped, at the point of choking. Sue was staring now.

"Henry, this is strange—sounds more like—"

"Well, like whom?"

"Like Zanin. That's the way he talked to me."

"Perhaps it's the way a man talks when he—" He could not control his voice and stopped.

Sue kept very still; but finally, softly, rather wearily, she said: "I'm sorry, Henry! I've got to catch the ten-fifteen back."

He looked at his watch; seeing nothing. "You'll be hurrying then, Sue."

"No, there's nearly an hour." She turned on the light, moved into the bedroom and glanced into an open bureau drawer. She drew out the one below, then thoughtful, half smiling, came to the door. "Henry—you packed everything?"

"Everything, I'm sure. Though you might take a last look around."

"But—Henry, you must have packed Betty's things, too."

The color surged up over his collar. He was thinking of those soft garments and the prayers that had rustled shyly upward from his torn heart as he felt them in his hands. Wordless, he unstrapped the trunk and lifted the lid. Sue repacked the trays.

She stood looking at the dancing clothes, fingering them.

"Henry," she said, "I shall never wear these again."

"That's silly, Sue."

"No. It isn't silly. I've got a job now. That's what we need, all of us—a job. You used to tell me that yourself. You were right." She was turning the costumes over with her slim hands. "Did you find a pair of boots, Henry? Red leather with clicks in the heels? They should have been with these Russian things."

"No," he replied, with a sudden huskiness, "I didn't see them."

"That's odd. They were right with the others." She turned away to give rooms and closets a final scrutiny. She brought a rough parcel in from the hall, feeling it with her hands.

"This yours or mine, Henry?" she asked. "I could swear it is those boots, but—"

"It *is* the boots!" he cried, like an angry man.

She stared. He waved them and her roughly aside.

"They belong to you, not to me. I lied to you! Take them! Pack them!"

Brows knit, puzzled, her sensitive mouth softening painfully, she opened the parcel and looked at the red boots—looked more closely, held them up to

the light; for she saw on them small round stains of a paler red. Slowly she raised her eyes until they met his.

His face was twisted with pain. Her own gaze grew misty.

"Pack them!" he cried in the same angry way. And she laid them in the trunk.

He was desperately fighting himself now. And with momentary success. He said abruptly: "I'm going to buy your books myself, Sue. So just leave them there for the present."

"You, Henry!" She bit her lip. "You know I can't let you do that."

"You've got to let me!" He stood right over her now.

"But you—with your library—"

"I have no library." His voice dropped here—and he stirred, walking over to the window; stared out; finally turned and said, more quietly: "Am I talking like a crazy man, Sue?"

"Well, Henry—" She tried to smile. "I have always counted on your steadiness. Perhaps I've leaned too much on it."

He stood considering her and himself. Suddenly he confronted her again, raised his long arms and gripped her shoulders.

"And now, Sue," he said, and she could feel his hands trembling with the passion that she heard in his voice, "I'm failing you."

"Oh, no, Henry; I won't let you say that—"

"No! And you won't say it yourself. But we both know it is true. I see it—the whole thing. You've had your girlish fling here in the Village. You were honest and natural. And you were maddeningly beautiful. We men have crowded about you, disturbed you, pressed you. Zanin was crazy about you. So was Peter. So were a lot of the others. So was I."

He felt her shoulders stir under his strong hands. Her eyelids were drooping. But he could not stop. "Everybody let it out but me. Do you know why I didn't? Because I was a coward. I haven't made love to women. Why? Because I wasn't attractive to them. And I was timid. I stayed with my books and let life go by. Then I found myself drawn into the circle about you. And I lost *my* head, too. I gave up my books—my 'library.' Do you know where that 'library' is now, Sue? At the bottom of the North River. Every book! I carried them over there myself, in parcels, with a weight in every parcel, and dropped 'em off the ferry boat. I tried to go in for reality, for what is called

life. I had Peter's tailor make me some good clothes. I got a newspaper job. Held that about two weeks. Tried to ask you to marry me. Oh, yes, I did. But couldn't get away with it. Sue, I never managed even to ask you. I talked marriage —almost talked you into it—but couldn't manage to talk about myself. Until now, just when you're worn out with work, with the pressures of men, with all the desperate confusions of life, when your soul is sick for peace—that's it, isn't it?"

Very slowly her head moved. "Yes, Henry, that's it."

"Why, then, I come along. And I'm the last straw. Stirring up the old turbulence just when you need my friendship most. I'm doing it now—this minute. I'm hurting you. I'm making you feel that you've lost me."

"Henry"—he saw the effort it cost her to speak and winced—"I can't bear to seem unsympathetic with you. But it's so hard. I can't see any way—except this of giving up self."

He let go her shoulders, swung away, and said: "There's just one thing to do. I'll call a taxi." He moved to the telephone, rummaged through the directory, still talking, the flood of feeling that had for months been impounded within his emotionally

inarticulate self rushing now past all barriers, sweeping every last protesting reticence before it. "I do understand, Sue. What you feel now is as deep an urge, almost, as this old sex impulse that muddles life so for all of us. It is what has driven millions of women into nunneries—to get away from life. Just as our Village freedom is a protest against unhealthy suppression and rigidity, so these fevers of self-abnegation are inevitable uprushings of protest against animalism." He had found the number now. He lifted the receiver. "It's Puritan against Cavalier—both right and both wrong! What number— Oh, I beg your pardon! Bryant six thousand. It's the Greeks against the Greatest of Jews—both right—both wrong! Taxi, please! Right away. Two-thousand-twenty-six Tenth Street. All right. Good-by. Beauty against duty —the instinct to express against the instinct to serve —both right, both wrong!"

He confronted her again; caught up her two hands and gripped them within his own. "You've had your little fling at expression, Sue. You were wonderful. You've set flowers growing in our hearts, and thank God for flowers! But life has trapped you. You've swung over to service. And now you've got to go through, work your way out

of it. God knows where you'll land. But if you've counted on my steadiness, by God, you may continue to count on it!"

He pressed her hands to his lips; kissed her knuckles, her fingers, her palms; then dropped them.

Sue sank into the armchair, very white. The tears ran down her cheeks. The Worm could not look at her; after a moment of aimless pacing, he went out to the front steps of the building and, bareheaded, still coatless, watched for the taxi. He helped carry out the big trunk. On the ride to the ferry he spoke only trivialities, and Sue spoke not at all. He did not cross the river with her; merely, there in the ferry house, gripped her hand—smiling after a fashion, limp of spirit (for the first great emotional uprush of his life seemed to have passed like a wave) and said:

"Good night, Sue. You'll let me help?"

"Of course, Henry."

"I'll sublet the place for you—to somebody. I'll take that on myself."

She considered this, then soberly inclined her head. "This is the key, Henry. Give it to Betty. And here's the key to the outer door."

He took the two keys; dropped them into his pocket, where they jingled against the other one.

"It's a lonely road you're taking, Sue. Good luck."

"Oh, I'll see you, Henry. It won't be so exacting as that."

"But life is going to change—for me and for you. The kaleidoscope won't fall again into the old combination. New crowds, new ideas, are coming in—new enthusiasms."

"The Village forgets pretty easily," she murmured, rather wistful.

"Yes, it forgets. . . . Sue, you'll marry—perhaps."

She shook her head, lips compressed. "No—not as I feel now. . . . Henry, you're too tragic! We needn't say good-by like this. Good heavens, I'm only going over to Jersey—eighteen miles! That's all."

"There are statute miles," said he, "and nautical miles, and—another kind."

"But I'll see you again."

"Oh, yes! Of course, Sue!"

"You can run out—some day when—"

Her voice faltered. He *had* been out of place in that kitchen. And she had been put to the necessity of explaining him. It was another sort of thing—hopelessly another sort of thing.

He was looking down at her, something of the old whimsical calm in his gaze, though sober, very sober.

"Anyway," said she, weakly, groping, "you three will go on having your good times over there in the Square. I find I like to think of you there. What was it they called you—the—"

"The Seventh-Story Men, Sue."

"Yes, that was it. You've been together so long, you three. I've always thought of your place as something stable in the Village. Everything else was changing, all the time."

"We've gone like the rest, Sue."

"Oh, no, Henry! Not really?"

"All gone! Hy goes one way, I another. And Pete stays alone. No more Seventh-Story Men. Good-by, Sue."

He watched her through the gate; waited to catch her last glance, then turned back into the city.

Slowly, very slowly, he approached the old brick building in the Square—his home.

In the lower hall he hesitated, wondering if Peter was in. Finally he asked the night man. No, Mr. Mann was not in. The Worm drew a long breath of relief and went up to the rooms.

It did not take long to pack his possessions. Now

that there were no books to consider everything went into one old suit-case. And with this he set forth into the night.

The experience had a gloomy thrill of its own. He had no notion where he was going. He hardly cared. The one great thing was to be going away—away from those rooms, from the trifling, irritating Hy, from the impossible Peter. He walked over to the bus station, set down his suit-case on the sidewalk, felt in his pockets to see if he had any money. He was always getting caught without it. He had given that taxi man an even bill.

Apparently he was without it again. But in one pocket he found three keys that jingled together in his hand.

He caught his breath; threw back his head and stared straight up through the trees at the stars.

"My God!" he whispered—"my God!"

He picked up the suit-case and marched off—a tall, thin, determined young man with an odd trick of throwing his right leg out and around as he walked and toeing in with the right foot—marched straight across town, under the Sixth Avenue Elevated, on into Greenwich Village; let himself into a rather dingy apartment building and then into a bare little three-rooms-and-bath from which not two

hours back he had helped carry a big trunk, and dropped into the armchair in the living-room. And his hands shook with excitement as he lighted his pipe.

"I'm a wild man!" he informed himself—"perfectly wild! It's not a bad thing!"

He slept, the last few hours of the night, on a bare mattress. But then a bachelor of a whimsical turn can make-shift now and then.

All this on the Saturday. On the Monday morning early, between eight and nine, there was giggling and fumbling at the apartment door, followed by a not over-resolute knock.

The Worm—pipe in mouth, wearing his old striped pajamas caught across the chest with a safety-pin,—dropped his pen, snorted with impatience, and strode, heedless of self to the door.

There stood an elated, abashed couple. Hy Lowe, still dapper, apparently very happy; Betty, glancing at him with an expression near timidity.

"Of all things!" she murmured, taking in the somewhat unconventional figure before her.

"You, Worm!" chuckled Hy blithely. "Why, you old devil!"

Henry Bates was looking impatiently from one to the other. "Well," said he—"what do you want?"

Hy looked at Betty; Betty looked at Hy. She colored very prettily; he leaned against the wall and laughed softly there until his eyes filled, laughed himself weak. Finally he managed to observe to the irate figure on the sill, who held his pipe in a threatening attitude and awaited an explanation—

"My son, are you aware that the lady lives here? Also that you could hardly be termed overdressed."

She spoke now, softly, with hesitation—

"Where is Sue, Mr. Bates?"

He waved his pipe. "Gone—New Jersey."

Betty seemed to recollect. "Oh, yes," she murmured. "And wasn't there something—the other day, when was it—"

She exchanged a helplessly emotional glance with the partly sobered Hy.

"—Saturday it must have been. Oh, of course, you wanted me to pack Sue's things."

"They're packed," snapped the Worm. "And gone."

"And what, pray, are you doing here?" This from Hy.

"Living here," said the Worm.

Again the two sought each other's eyes.

"Well, really—" Hy began.

Betty rested her hand on his arm. "Perhaps,

Mr. Bates—you see, some of my things are here—some things I need—"

Suddenly the Worm remembered. He blushed; then seemed to grow more angry.

"You'd better come in and get them," said he.

"Well—if I might—"

They came in. Betty repacked her bag in the bedroom. Once she called to Hy; they whispered; then he brought her his bag.

Next Hy stood by the window and softly whistled a new rag. Meanwhile the Worm with a touch of self-consciousness, slipped on his coat. He had no bathrobe.

Hy, still whistling, looked at the litter of closely written sheets on the table.

"What's this," said he—"writing your novel?"

"I was," growled the Worm. He stared at the manuscript; then at Hy; then at the busy, beautiful, embarrassed young woman in the bedroom.

Suddenly and savagely, he gathered up the papers, tore them down and across, handful by handful and stuffed them into the fireplace.

Hy looked on in amazement.

Betty was ready, and called to him. The Worm, set of face, showed them out. He did not know that he slammed the door behind them.

On the steps Betty said—softly, the coo of a mating bird in her voice—"What a funny man! I'm glad you're not like that, dear." And slipped her fingers into his.

Hy returned her pressure; then withdrew his hand, glanced nervously up and down the street, and hurried her into the taxi that waited at the curb.

"One sure thing," he muttered, "we can't eat breakfast *there!*"

Back in the rooms, the Worm—suddenly, feverishly, eager—laid out a fresh block of paper, dipped his pen into the ink, and snatching up a book for a ruler, drew a heavy line across near the top of the page. Above this line he printed out carefully—

THE BOUNDARY

A NOVEL

BY HENRY BATES

Beneath the line he wrote, swiftly, all nervous energy, sudden red spots on his haggard cheeks—

"CHAPTER ONE."

"They stood at the door . . ."

This, you recall, was the beginning of the strongest novel that has come out of Greenwich Village in many a year.

CHAPTER XXXIII

EARTHY BROWNS AND GREENS

AT about two o'clock in the afternoon on a Saturday in early September Sue Wilde opened a letter from the Worm.

Before dropping on the stiff walnut chair Sue had closed the door; ruffled by the feeling that it must be closed, conscious even of guilt. For it was a tenet of Aunt Matilda's, as of Mrs. Wilde's, that a woman should not sit down before mid-afternoon, and not then on Mondays, Wednesdays or Saturdays. And here her bed was not yet made.

"Dear Sue (so the letter ran)—Herewith my check for the September rent. Sorry to be late. I forgot it."

The letter sank to her lap. Pictures rose—memories. She saw the half-furnished little apartment on Tenth Street, in the heart of the old Village where she had spent the two busiest, most disturbing, yet—yes, happiest years of her life.

"There's a little news, some of which I can't tell you. Not until I know—which may be by the time this reaches you. In that case, if the news is anywhere near what I'm fool enough, every other minute, to hope, I shall doubtless be rushing post haste to see you and tell you how it all came about. I may reach you in person before this letter does. At present it is a new Treasure Island, a wildly adventurous comedy of life, with me for the hero—or the villain. That's what I'm waiting to be told. But it's rather miraculous."

It was like Henry Bates to write mysteriously. He was excited; or he wouldn't be threatening to come out. It had been fine of him to keep from coming out. He hadn't forced her to ask it of him. She knew he wanted to. Now, at the thought that he almost certainly was coming, her pulse quickened.

There was a sound in the hall, a cautious turning of the door-knob.

Flushing, all nerves and self-consciousness, she leaped up, thrust the letter behind her, moved toward the bed that had not yet been made.

The shyly smiling face of a nine-year-old girl appeared.

"Oh, is it you, Miriam!" breathed Sue.

"And Becky. *If* we were to come in—"

"Come along and shut the door after you."

The children made for the closet where hung cer-

tain dancing costumes that had before this proved to hold a fascination bordering on the realm of magic. Sue resumed her letter.

"Zanin is part of the news, Sue. He seems to have hit on prosperity. There are whispers that the great Silverstone has taken him up in earnest, sees in him the making of a big screen director. Z. himself told me the other night at the Parisian that he is going to put on a film production that will make *The Dawn of an Empire* and his own (and your) Nature look like the early efforts of an amateur.

"There's still another piece of news I'm bursting with. I can't believe you don't know. But you haven't asked—haven't mentioned it in your letters. And Zanin told me he was wholly out of touch with you. It is hard to believe that you don't know it. For this bit of news is about you. The other that I spoke of first, is about me—a smaller matter. Lord, but you have buried yourself, Sue! You certainly went the whole thing.

"Zanin, by the way, and that Belgian girl—Heléne something or other; you know, works in pastels, those zippy little character portraits, and dancing girls (didn't she do you, once?)—well, they're inseparable. It bothers me a little, seeing them always together at the Muscovy and the Parisian and Jim's. After all the stirring things you and he did together. She has spruced him up a lot, too. She's dressing him in color schemes—nice earthy browns and greens. Yes, J. Z. dresses amazingly well now. He has picked up a little money in these new business conections of his. But I resent the look of it—

as if he had forgotten you. Though if he hadn't I should be crudely, horribly jealous.

"If I do come out I'll do my best to look respectable. Tell you what—I'll put on the good suit I had made especially to propose to you in. Remember? The time I lost my nerve and didn't say the words. Haven't worn it since, Sue. And the hat—shoes—cane. I'll wear 'em all! No one could be more chastely 'suburbaniacal' than Henry Bates will appear on this significant occasion. Even the forbidding aunt will feel a dawning respect for the erstwhile Worm—who was not a Worm, after all, but a chrysalis, now shortly to emerge a glittering, perfect creature.

"Think not unkindly of your abandoned Villager,
"HENRY B."

At the ending she chuckled aloud. The letter had carried her far from the plain room in a rather severe little house which in its turn conformed scrupulously in appearance to the uniformity that marked the double row of houses on this suburban street. They were all eyes, those houses.

She tried to reconstruct a mental picture of that remarkable costume of the Worm's. But it was difficult to remember; she had seen it only the once, months ago, back in the spring. Would he look overdressed? That would be worse than if he were to wear the old bagging gray suit, soft collar and flowing tie—and the old felt hat. For the

Street might think him one of her mysteriously theatrical acquaintances from the wicked city, in which event a new impetus would be given to the whispering that always ran subtly back and forth between the houses that were all eyes.

There was other chuckling in the room. The two children stood before her—Miriam, the elder, a big-eyed girl with a fluff of chestnut hair caught at the neck with a bow; Becky, small for her seven years, with tiny hands and feet and a demure mouth. Miriam had about head and shoulders the Spanish scarf that Sue had worn in Zanin's Carmen ballet at the Crossroads; Becky had thrust her feet into the red leather boots of Sue's Russian costume. When they found their half-sister's eye upon them the two giggled irresistibly.

Sue felt a warm impulse to snatch them both up in her arms. But she sobered. This was old ground. Mrs. Wilde, as the wife and widow of an evangelical minister, felt strongly against dancing. Sue had promised to keep silent regarding this vital side of her own life.

Becky shuffled humorously to Sue's knee. Miriam came to her side, leaned against her shoulder, and gently, admiringly stroked her thick short hair, now grown to an unruly length but still short enough to

disclose the fine outline of Sue's boyish yet girlish head.

"Tell us about the time you were a movie actress." This from Miriam.

Sue, dispirited, shook her head. "You must take off those things, children. Put them back in the closet. Your mother wouldn't like it if she saw you."

Instead of obeying, Miriam leaned close to her ear and whispered: "I've seen movies. Yesterday with the girls—after school. There was a wild west one, *Clarice of the Canyon,* and a comedy where he falls through the ceiling and all the plaster comes down on the bed and then the bed goes through another ceiling and all. It was awfully funny."

Sue mentally cast about her for guidance in the part she had promised to play. She deliberately frowned. "Does your mother know about it, Miriam?"

The girl, bright-eyed, shook her head.

"Then it was wrong."

Miriam still watched her, finally saying: "Do you know why I told you?"

Sue, feeling rather helpless, shook her head.

"Because I knew you wouldn't tell on me."

Sue pursed her lips.

She heard a voice from the stair landing, Aunt Matilda's voice.

"Sue!" it called—"Sue! Some one to see you!"

The Worm, surely! She sprang up, smoothed her shirt-waist before the mirror, tried to smooth her unmanageable hair. Her color was rising. She waited a moment to control this.

"Sue! Come down!"

She passed her aunt on the stairs and was detained by a worn hand.

"It's a man," whispered the older woman—"one of those city friends of yours, I take it. Looks like a Jew. Goodness knows what people will think! As if they didn't have enough to talk about already, without—this!"

Sue shook off her hand and ran down the stairs, oblivious now to her color as to the angry flash in her striking green eyes. It was Zanin, of course—of all men! What if he had heard! In Greenwich Village there was none of the old vulgar race prejudice. Zanin was in certain respects the ablest man she had ever known. But there was no possibility that he could be understood, even tolerated, in this house on the Street.

She found him on the front porch where Aunt Matilda had left him. And for an instant, before

extending her hand, she stared. For there stood the new Zanin—perceptibly fuller in face and figure, less wildly eager of eye, clad in the earthy brown suit that had so impressed the Worm, with a soft gray-green shirt that might have been flannel or silk or a mixture of the two, and a large bow tie and soft hat of a harmonious green-brown.

He smiled easily, thoughtfully down at her as he took her hand. Then she felt him, more sober, more critical, studying her appearance.

"Well, Sue," he observed—this was indeed a calm, successful-appearing Zanin—"you're not looking so fit as you might."

She could say nothing to this.

"Dancing any?"

"No. None." She was wondering what to do with him. The choice appeared to lie between the stuffy parlor and this front porch. Within, the household would hear every word; out here the eyes of the Street would watch unrelentingly. With an impassive face and a little shrug, she remarked, indicating a stiff porch chair—

"Sit down, Jacob."

"I'll take this," said he, dropping down on the top step in the most conspicuous spot of all. And he smiled at her.

"You can't guess what brings me, Sue. First, I want you to run in town this evening."

She shook her head, slowly.

"You'd better. It's an unusual event. It wouldn't do to miss it."

Her eyes wandered toward the hall behind the screen door, then off to the row of wooden houses across the street.

"Nevertheless," said she, "it's going to be missed, Jacob."

He studied her. "I'm debating with myself whether to tell you about it, Sue. Though it's a wonder you don't know. Haven't you followed the papers?"

Again she shook her head.

"I'm wondering, though," she observed: "from the way you are talking, and from something Henry Bates said in a letter that came to-day—if it isn't the Nature film."

"That's it," said he. "First performance to-night. Really don't you know?"

"Not a thing, Jacob."

"Why, our old friend Silverstone is in on it. He bought out the Interstellar interest. We're featuring it. At a two-dollar house, Sue—think of that! *The Dawn of an Empire* is nowhere. Unless it

falls flat—which it won't!—there'll be a bit of money in it for all of us. What do you say now, eh!"

"Money?" mused Sue, incredulous.

"Regular money—even for the small interest you and Peter and I hold. But that's only the beginning. Listen here now, Sue! A little time has gone by. You've hidden yourself out here—let your spirit sag—so I suppose you may find some difficulty in grasping this. But the Nature film is you, child. You're half famous already, thanks to the way we're letting loose on publicity. You're going to be a sensation—a knock-out—once the blessed public sees that film. Remember this: just because you decided to be another sort of person you haven't become that other person. Not for a minute! The big world is tearing right along at the old speed and you with it. With it? No—ahead of it! That's what our old *Nature,* that you worked so hard on, is doing for you right now. Can you grasp that?"

"Oh, yes," said she listlessly, "I grasp it all right. But you're wrong in saying it is me. I am another person. Jacob—I couldn't go to see that film."

"Couldn't see it?"

"No." Her lips were compressed.

"But, Sue—that's outrageous! It's fanatical!"

"Maybe it is. I can't help it."

"You mean the frankness—the costuming—"

She pressed her hands over her eyes. "And people from here will be slipping in to see it—sneaking in when they think their neighbors won't see them—and seeing me on exhibition there! And they will whisper. Oh, the vulgarity of it! . . . Jacob, don't talk about it. I can't! Please!"

He studied her, through narrowed eyes. "The poor kid *is* going through it!" he thought. "I had no idea!" Deliberately, with the coldness, the detachment, of his race, he considered the problem. At length he said:

"I'll tell you my main errand, Sue. I've got an enormous new production on. It's in my hands, too, as director. Silverstone gives me carte blanche—that's his way. Big man. Now I've got an eye in my head. I've seen our *Nature* run off. And I happen to know that the big movie star of to-morrow, the sensation of them all, is Miss Sue Wilde. You don't realize that, of course. All right! Don't try to. But do try to get *this*. I want you for my new production. And I can offer you more money than you ever saw in all your life. Not two thousand a week, like Mabel Wakeford, but a lot. And still you'll be cheaper to my company than women not half so good who have built up a market value

in the film business. It will be a bargain for us. I brought out a contract ready for you to sign. Salary begins to-morrow if you say the word. Would you like to read it over?"

Her hands were still over her eyes. She shook her head.

Instead of pressing his business he went on quietly studying her. He studied the house, too; and the street. After a time he consulted a time-table and his watch.

"Sue," he said then, "I'm disappointed."

"I'm sorry, Jacob." She looked up now and threw out her hands. "But you couldn't understand. I couldn't look at that film, at myself doing those things. It's a thing that's—well, Jacob, it is repellent to me now. It's a thing I wish I hadn't done. I thought I believed it—your theory of freedom, naturalness, all that. I don't believe it. But all the same I'm on record there. The most conspicuous girl in the United States—from what you say—'

"Easily that, Sue. By to-morrow."

"—picturing a philosophy I don't believe in. I've been daring almost to forget it. Now you're bringing it home to me. It is branded on me now. God knows what it is going to mean! Of course it will follow me into my home here. And you know what

people will think and say—these people"—she indicated the orderly street with a sweep of a fine arm and hand—"they'll think and talk of me as a girl who has done what no decent girl can do and stay decent—"

She stopped, choking. He was still coolly observing her.

"Yes," he said again, "I'm disappointed. I'm afraid it's just as well for you to give up. You've lost something, Sue."

He rose. And she let him go in silence; stood looking after him until he disappeared around the corner. Then she went up to her room.

The children were still there, serenely happy in unheard-of mischief. They had all her dancing clothes spread out on the bed.

She closed the door. The girls giggled nervously; she hardly saw them. She lifted up the Russian costume and fingered the bright-colored silk. Dreams came to her mind's eye. She looked at the little boots of red leather.

"I wonder," she murmured.

"Please dance for us," begged Miriam shyly, at her side. She hardly heard.

She moved to the side of the room, then leaped out in that bounding, crouching Russian step. She

was stiff, awkward. She stepped back and tried it again.

The children laughed in sheer excitement and clapped their hands. Becky tried to imitate the step, fell over and rolled, convulsed with laughter, on the floor.

The door opened and Mrs. Wilde stood on the threshold. She was a tall thin woman, all in black, with a heavy humorless mouth, pallid skin, flat pouches under her eyes.

"Miriam! Becky!" she cried. "Come here instantly!"

Becky got up. The two children, crestfallen, between sulkiness and a measure of fear, moved slowly toward the door. The mother stood aside, ushered them out, then confronted the younger woman. There was a tired sort of anger in her eyes. The almost impenetrable egotism of her widowhood had been touched and stirred by the merry little scene.

"You hold your promises lightly," she said.

Sue bit her lip, threw out her hands. "It isn't that—"

"Then what is it?" Mrs. Wilde moved into the room and closed the door. "I don't quite see what we are to do, Sue. I can't have this sort of temptation put before them right here in their home. You

know what I have taught them and what I expect of them. You know I wish to be kind to you, but this isn't fair. He—he . . ." She carried a handkerchief, heavily bordered with black. This she pressed to her eyes.

A hot temper blazed in Sue. She struggled with it. Sharp words rushed to her tongue. She drove them back.

It occurred to her that she must be considerate; the woman's life had been torn from its roots, what mind she had was of course overwhelmed. Sue stood there, her hands clenched at her sides, groping desperately for some point of mental contact with the woman who had married her father—forgetting that there had never been a point of mental contact. Suddenly she recalled a few hot phrases of the Worm's, spoken in regard to this very matter of her attempt to confine her life within this gloomy home —"It's Puritan against Cavalier—both right, both wrong! It's the Greeks against the Greatest of Jews —both right, both wrong! Beauty against duty, the instinct to express against the instinct to serve —both right, both wrong!" . . . Was Henry Bates right? Was the gulf between her natural self and this home unbridgeable? Motionless, tense, she tried, all in an instant, to think this through—and

failed. A wave of emotion overwhelmed her, an uprushing of egotism as blind as the egotism of the woman in black who stood stiffly against the closed door. It was a clash—not of wills, for Sue's will was to serve—but of natures.

CHAPTER XXXIV

ONE DOES FORGET ABOUT HAPPINESS

SUE felt that the woman was about to speak, and suddenly she knew that she could not listen. Fighting down the rather terrifying force of her emotions, fighting tears even, she rushed to the door, mutely brushed Mrs. Wilde aside and ran down the stairs. Sue let herself out on the front porch, closed the screen door and leaned back against it, clinging to the knob, breathless, unstrung. The eyes of the Street would be on her, of course. She thought of this and dropped into one of the porch chairs.

A man turned the corner—a tall, rather young man who wore a shapeless suit of gray, a limp collar, a flowing bow tie, a soft hat; and who had a trick of throwing his leg out and around as he walked and toeing in with the right foot.

He turned in, grinning cheerfully and waving a

lean hand. He mounted the steps. Sue sat erect, gripping the arms of her chair, eyes bright, and laughed nervously.

"Henry," she cried, "you're hopeless! Where's the new suit? You're not a bit respectable."

He seated himself on the porch railing and gazed ruefully downward.

"Sue, I'm sorry. Plum forgot. And I swore I'd never disgrace you again. I *am* hopeless. You're right." Then he laughed—irresponsibly, happily, like a boy.

She stared at him. "What is it, Henry?"

"Everything, child! You see before you the man who has just conquered the world. All of it. And no worlds left. Mr. Alexander H. Bates."

"Oh," said she, thinking swiftly back—"your novel!"

"Right. My novel."

"But it isn't finished, Henry."

"Not quite half done."

"Then, how can—"

He raised a long hand and rose. He gazed down benignly at her. "The greatest publisher in these U. S. has had the good fortune to read the first fourteen chapters. A whisper blew to me yesterday of the way things were going—before I

wrote you. But the word this morning was not a whisper, Susan. It was an ear-splitting yell. Mister Greatest Publisher personally sent for me. Told me he had been looking for me—exactly me!—these twenty-eight years. And here I am. Money now if I need it. And do I need it? God, do I need it! And fame later—when I get the book done. Now, child, tell me how glad you are. At once."

He walked the porch; came back and stood before her; grinned and grinned.

She could not find words. Soberly her eyes followed him. Her set mouth softened. Her tightened muscles relaxed until she was leaning back limp in the chair.

"Isn't it the devil, Sue!" said he. "The one thing my heart was set on was to wear that good suit. Sue, I was going to put it all over this suburb of yours—just smear 'em! And look—I have to go and forget. Nothing comes out to see you but the same disgraceful old gipsy. How could I?"

Sue leaned forward. "Henry, I'm glad. I love this old suit. But there's a button coming loose—there, on your coat."

"I know, Sue. I sewed at it, but it doesn't hold. I'm meaning to stop at a tailor's, next time I'm over toward Sixth Avenue."

She was studying his face now. "You're happy, Henry," she said.

"Well—in a sense! In a sense!"

"It is a good thing you came. I was forgetting about happiness."

"I know. One does." He consulted his watch. "It's five-twenty-two now, Sue. And we're catching the five-thirty-eight back to town."

She did not speak. But her eyes met his, squarely; held to them. It was a forthright eye-to-eye gaze, of the sort that rarely occurs, even between friends, and that is not soon forgotten. Sue had been white, sitting there, when he came and after. Now her color returned.

He bent over and took her elbow. The touch of his hand was a luxury. Her lids drooped; her color rose and rose. She let him almost lift her from the chair. Then she went in for her hat and coat; still silent. They caught the five-thirty-eight.

"What are we going in for?" she asked, listless again, when they had found a seat in the train.

"Oh, come! You know! To see the almost famous Sue Wilde of Greenwich Village—"

"Not of the Village now, Henry!"

"—in the film sensation of the decade, *Nature,* suggested and directed by Jacob Zanin, written by

Eric Mann, presented by the Nature Film Producing Company, Adolph Silverstone, President. You see, I've been getting you up, Sue."

She was staring out the window gloomily.

"I swore I wouldn't go, Henry."

"But that would be a shame."

"I know—of course. But—Henry, you don't understand. Nobody understands! I'm not sure I can stand it to sit there and see myself doing those things—and have to talk with people I know, and—"

"I think I could smuggle you in," said he, thoughtful. "This isn't a little movie house, you know. It's a regular theater. There ought to be a separate gallery entrance. That would make it easy."

She changed the subject. "Where shall we eat, Henry?"

"The Parisian?"

She shook her head. "Let's go to Jim's."

To Jim's they went; and it seemed to his whimsically watchful eyes that she had an occasional moment of being her old girlish self as they strolled through the wandering streets of Greenwich Village and stepped down into the basement oyster and chop house that had made its name a full generation be-

fore Socialism was more than a foreign-sounding word and two generations before cubism, futurism, vorticism, imagism, Nietzsche, the I. W. W., Feminism and the Russians had swept in among the old houses and tenements to engage in the verbal battle royal that has since converted the quaint old quarter from a haunt of rather gently artistic bohemianism into a shambles of dead and dismembered and bleeding theories. Jim's alone had not changed. Even the old waiter who so far as any one knew had always been there, shuffled through the sprinkling of sawdust on the floor; and the familiar fat grandson of the original Jim was still to be seen standing by the open grill that was set in the wall at the rear end of the oyster bar.

The Worm suggested thick mutton chops and the hugely delectable baked potatoes without which Jim's would not have been Jim's. Sue smiled rather wanly and assented. Her air of depression disturbed him; his own buoyancy sagged; he found it necessary now and then to manufacture talk. This was so foreign to the quality of their friendship that he finally laid down his knife and fork, rested his elbows on the table and considered her.

"Sue," he remarked, "it's getting to you, isn't it —the old Village."

She tried to smile, and looked off toward the glowing grill.

"Why don't you come around and have a look at the rooms? I haven't changed them. Only your pictures are gone. Even your books are on the mantel where you used to keep them. It might hook things up for us, so we could get to feeling and talking like ourselves. What do you say—could you stand it?"

She tried to look at him, tried to be her old frank self; but without marked success. The tears were close. She had to compress her lips and study the table-cloth for a long moment before she could speak.

"I couldn't, Henry." Then with an impulse that was more like the Sue that he knew, she reached out and rested her hand on his arm. "Try not to mind me, Henry. I can't help it—whatever it is. I don't seem to have much fight left in me. It's plain enough that I shouldn't have tried to come in. It was just a crazy reaction, anyway. You caught me when I had been hurt. I was all mixed . . ."

She was excluding him from her little world now; and this was least like her of all the things she had been saying and doing. But if the Worm was hurt he did not show it. He merely said:

"Sue, of course, you've been going through a nervous crisis, and it has taken a lot out of you."

"A lot, Henry," she murmured.

"One thing strikes me—superficial, of course—I doubt if you've had enough exercise this summer."

"I know," said she. "To-day I tried a few steps—that—old Russian dance, you know—"

"I'd love to see you do it, Sue."

She shook her head. "I've lost it—everything."

"You were stiff, of course."

"It was painful. I just couldn't dance. I don't like to think of it, Henry."

He smiled. "One thing—I've decided to make you walk to the theater. It's two miles. That'll stir your pulse a bit. And we'll start now."

She looked soberly at him. "You've lost nothing, Henry. The work you've done hasn't taken it out of you."

"Not a bit. On the contrary, Sue."

"I know. I feel it."

"No more of the old aimlessness, Susan. No more books—except a look at yours now and then, because they were yours. God, girl, I'm creating! I'm living! I'm saying something. And I really seem to have it to say. That's what stirs you, puts a tingle into your blood."

She studied him a moment longer, then lowered her eyes. "Let's be starting," she said.

"Up Fifth Avenue, Sue?"

"Oh, yes, Henry!"

They walked eastward on Waverly Place, across Sixth Avenue. She paused here and looked up almost fondly at the ugly, shadowy elevated structure in the twilight. A train roared by.

"I haven't seen the city for two months," she said.

"That's a long time—for a live person," said he.

The dusty foliage of Washington Square appeared ahead. Above it like a ghost of the historic beauty of the old Square, loomed the marble arch. The lights of early evening twinkled from street poles and shone warmly from windows.

They turned up the Avenue whose history is the history of a century of New York life. Through the wide canyon darted the taxis and limousines that marked the beginnings of the city's night activity. The walks were thronged with late workers hurrying to their homes in the tenements to the south and west.

The Parisian restaurant was bright with silver, linen and electric lights behind the long French windows. He caught Sue giving the old place a sober, almost wistful glance.

At Fourteenth Street they encountered the ebb of the turbid human tide that at nightfall flows east and west across the great Avenue and picked their way through.

Above Fourteenth Street they entered the deep dim canyon of loft buildings. The sweatshops were here from which every noon and every night poured forth the thousands upon thousands of toilers—underfed, undersized, prominent of nose, cheek-bones and lips, gesticulating, spreading and shambling of gait, filling the great Avenue with a low roar of voluble talk in a strange guttural tongue—crowding so densely that a chance pedestrian could no more than drift with the slow current.

The nightly torrent was well over when Sue and the Worm walked through the blighted district, but each was familiar with the problem; each had played some small part in the strikes that stirred the region at intervals. Sue indeed pointed out the spot, just below Twenty-third Street where she had been arrested for picketing. And the Worm noted that she had steadied perceptibly as the old associations bit by bit reasserted their claims on her life. She was chatting with him now, nearly in the old, easy, forthright way. By the time the huge white facade of the Public Library came into view, with its steps,

terraces, railings and misty trees, and the cross-town cars were clanging by just ahead at Forty-second Street, and they were meeting an occasional bachelor diner-out hurrying past in dinner-coat and straw hat, the Worm found himself chuckling again. They turned west on Forty-second Street, crossing Sixth Avenue, Broadway and Seventh Avenue, passing the glittering hotel on a famous corner and heading for the riotously whirling, darting, blazing devices in colored light by means of which each theater of the congested group sought to thrust itself most violently upon the bewildered optic nerves of the passer-by.

Opposite one of these the Worm took Sue's arm, very gently, and halted her on the curb. The evening throng brushed past, heedless of the simply dressed girl who yet was oddly, boyishly slim and graceful of body, and who was striking of countenance despite the weariness evident about the rather strongly modeled mouth and the large, thoughtful green eyes; heedless, as well, of the lank, shabbily dressed young man who held her arm and bent earnestly over her. They were atoms in the careering metropolis, uncounted polyps in the blind, swarming, infinitely laborious structure that is New

York. And they thought themselves, each, the center of the universe.

"Sue, dear," said he, "here we are. You're about to see yourself. It will be an experience. And it won't be what you're thinking and—yes, dreading. I've seen it—"

She glanced up in surprise.

"Last night—an exhibition to the newspaper men." The emotion in his voice was evident. She glanced up again, something puzzled. "It was last night—afterward—that I decided on bringing you in. I wouldn't for anything in the world have missed having you here to-night. Though, at that, if Mr. Greatest Publisher hadn't warmed my soul with that wonderful blast of hot air I probably shouldn't have had the nerve. Of course I knew it would be an ordeal. It's been on my conscience every minute. But I had to bring you, and I believe you'll understand why, two hours from now. I'm hoping you will, Sue."

He hesitated. She waited. Suddenly then, he hurried her across the busy street and into the dim shelter of the gallery entrance.

"Zanin was out in front," said he, "with some of the newspaper boys, but I got you by."

Many individuals and groups were detaching themselves from the endless human stream and turning in between the six-foot lithographs at the main entrance to the theater. More and more steadily as Sue and the Worm stood in the shadow of the lesser doorway they had chosen, the crowds poured in. Others were turning in here toward the gallery and tramping up the long twisting stairway.

"Big house!" chuckled the Worm. "Oh, they'll put it across, Sue. You wait! Zanin's publicity has been wonderful. It would have disturbed you, girl —but it's rather a shame you haven't followed it."

Sue seemed not to hear him. She was leaning out from the doorway, trying to make out the subjects of the two big lithographs. She finally slipped across to the curb and studied them a moment. Both were of herself, half-clad in the simple garment of an island savage; over each picture was the one word, "NATURE," under each the two words, "SUE WILDE."

She hurried back and started up the stairs. The Worm saw that she was flushing again and that her mouth wore the set look.

On a landing, holding her back from a group ahead, he said: "Do you know, Sue, part of the

disturbance you feel is just a shrinking from conspicuousness, from the effective thing. Self-consciousness! Isn't it, now?"

But she turned away and kept on.

CHAPTER XXXV

THE NATURE FILM

AT that time no moving picture had been given the setting that Jacob Zanin devised for the Nature film. Zanin had altered the interior of the building to make it as little as possible like the conventional theater. Only the walls, galleries and boxes and stage remained as they had been. The new decorations were in the pale greens and pinks of spring and were simple. Between foyer and auditorium were palms, with orchids and other tropical flowers. The orchestra was not in sight. The ushers were calm girls from the Village—students of painting, designing, writing, sculpture—dressed modestly enough in a completer drapery of the sort worn by Sue in the pictures, such a material as Philippine women weave from grasses and pineapple strands, softly buff and cream and brown in color, embroidered with exquisite skill in exotic designs. The stage before the screen (Zanin used no drop

curtain) represented a native village on some imaginary South Sea Island. The natives themselves were there, quietly moving about the routine of their lives or sitting by a low fire before the group of huts at one side of the stage.

Very likely you saw it. If so, you will understand the difficulty I am confronted with in describing the place. It made a small sensation, the theater itself, apart from the Nature film. But a penned description could not convey the freshness, the quiet charm, the dignity of that interior.

The dignity was what first touched Sue. The Worm watched her sidelong as her eyes roved from the flat surfaces of pure bold color on the walls to the quietly idyllic scene on the stage that managed to look as if it were not a stage. She exhibited little emotion at first. Her brow was slightly furrowed, the eyes thoughtful, the mouth set—that was all. She had gone through the difficult months of enacting the film at first with enthusiasm, later doggedly. She had early lost her vision of the thing as a whole; her recollections now were of doing over and over this bit and that, of a certain youthful actor who had taken it for granted that a girl who would dress as she had to dress the character could be casually made love to, of interminable train

rides to the outdoor "locations," of clashes of will between Zanin and the Interstellar people—of work, quarrels, dust, money and the lack of it and a cumulative disillusionment. It came to her now that she had lost that early vision. More, she had forgotten the sincerity and the purpose of Jacob Zanin, that beneath his cold Jewish detachment he believed this thing—that the individual must be freed from conformity and (as he saw it) its attendant hypocrisy by breaking the yoke of the home. It must be the individual—first, last, always—the glad, free individual—the will to live, to feel, to express.

It was the Village jargon, done into something near a masterpiece. Sue began to see as the film unrolled before her eyes, reel by reel, that Zanin had never for a moment lost his dream. Even now, merely sitting in that steep crowded gallery waiting for the first reel of the ten, Sue knew that he had never lost it. Nor had Peter. The thought was exciting. It brought the color back to her cheeks. Her lips parted slightly. She was feeling again the enthusiasm Peter's scenario had roused in her at the start, but with a new intensity. The Worm, at her side, watching every slight subtle change of that young face, forgot his own stirring news of the morning, forgot that he was Alexander H. Bates, and the ex-

pression of a man who had been long hungry crept into his eyes.

The Nature film, you recall, pictured an imaginary people, simple, even primitive, untouched by what men call civilization. To their secluded island comes the ship of an explorer, suggesting by its outlines and rigging and the costumes of officers and crew the brave days of Captain Cook, or perhaps a period half a century earlier. The indefiniteness of it was baffling and fascinating. At no point did it date. And the island was not one of those that dot the South Seas, at least the inhabitants were not savages. They were intelligent, industrious, gentle. But the women hunted and fished with the men. Love—or passion, at least—was recognized for the impermanent gust it so often is—and, as such, was respected. No woman dreamed of tying herself for life to a lover she no longer loved. Neither want nor respectability could lower her pride to that point. Fatherhood, apparently, was not fixed, a hint being conveyed that the men as a group were bound to contribute to the welfare of young mothers. Thus the men were perhaps less glad and free than the women; indeed there was more than a suggestion of matriarchy. . . . To this community, thrown by an accident on its shores, the hundred-

odd men from the ship brought a habit of discipline, a holy book (that was and was not the Bible), a rigid marriage law, a complete hard theory of morality with attached penalties, plenty of firearms, hogshead upon hogshead of strong liquor, and underlying everything else an aggressive acquisitiveness that showed itself in the beginning as the trading instinct and later, of course, became politics and control.

In some measure it was the old obvious outcry against the conquest of weak and simple peoples. Or the situation at the start indicated something of the sort. But the story that grew out of the situation was less obvious. Indeed, developed by Peter, with his theatrical skill, out of Zanin's raw anarchism, it was a drama of quality and power. Zanin had been able to make nothing more out of it than a clash of social theories. Peter had made it a clash of persons; and through the deliberate development of this clash ran, steadily increasing in poignancy and tragic force straight to the climax of assassination, the story of a girl. Peter himself did not know how good it was. Not until he read about it in the papers (after which he became rather irritatingly complacent regarding it). For you will remember, Peter was crazily pursuing that girl

when he wrote it. And the girl was boldly, wonderfully Sue—a level-eyed, outspoken young woman, confronting life; ashamed of nothing, not her body, not her soul; dreaming beautifully of freedom, of expressing herself, of living her life, vibrant with health, courage, joy.

The girl, you know, fell in love with a young sailor and gave herself proudly and freely. The sailor could not comprehend her, became furtive and jealous. They quarreled. To quiet her he was driven to brutality. For he was a respectable man and held his reputation high. The affair became known. The men of the ship, muttering strange words about a custom called marriage, held her as bad, fell on the age-old decision that she must continue to be bad, at their call, though furtively. For they were all respectable men.

Then we saw the girl as an outcast, fed, for a time, secretly by the cowed bewildered tribe. We saw her as a dishonored mother, fighting the sea, the forest, the very air for sustenance. We caught glimpses of the new community, growing into a settlement of some stability, the native men forced into the less wholesome labor, their wives and daughters taken and poisoned with this strange philosophy of life. Then we saw our girl, her child toddling at

her heels, creeping back into the society where trade and politics, hard liquor (distilled now from the native grain), that holy book of mysterious spell, the firearms and an impenetrable respectability reigned in apparent security over smoldering fires. And finally we saw the girl, not at all a penitent, but a proud inspired creature of instinct, fan those fires until they purged the taint of sophistication from each slumbering native soul and drove a half-mad people at the desperate job of extermination and of reasserting itself as a people on the old lawlessly happy footing. They burned the hogsheads of liquor, the firearms, the heap of holy books, on one great bonfire.

I am not doing it justice. But this much will serve to recall the story.

As for Zanin's propaganda, I doubt if it cut in very deeply. Critics and public alike appeared to take it simply as a novelty, a fresh sensation as they had taken Reinhardt and the Russian Ballet. The primitiveness of it reached them no more clearly than the primitiveness of Wagner's operas reached them. The clergy stormed a bit, of course; but not because they comprehended the deeply implied anarchistic motive. They were concerned over Zanin's rather unbending attitude toward a certain

book. And Zanin, delighted, fed columns of controversy to the afternoon papers, wrote open letters to eminent divines, and in other ways turned the protest into a huge success of publicity. Then a professional objector, apparently ignorant of the existence of an enticing and corrupting "Revue" across the street, haled Zanin, Silverstone and two of the Interstellar people into court on the ground that the costuming was improper. This matter Zanin, after the newspapers had done it full justice, compromised by cutting out twenty-two feet of pictures and one printed explanation which seemed to the professional objector to justify child-birth out of wedlock.

No, beyond these brief attacks of virtue, I have never been able to see that the great city did not pulse along about as before. Broadway and Forty-second Street held their usual evening throngs. The saloons and hotel bars took in fortunes from the flushed, sometimes furtive men that poured out between the acts of that "Revue." Gamblers gambled, robbers robbed; the glittering hotels thrived; men bought and sold and centered on the ugly business of politics and bargained with the nameless girls that lurked in shadowy doorways—but furtively, of course, with an eye to respectability. And in par-

sonages on side streets clergymen studied the precise attitude of Paul toward the doctrine of Free Will or wrote (for Sunday evening) of the beautiful day that was close at hand when all men should sing in harmony and not discord, with harp accompaniment. . . . No, I think, despite Zanin's purpose, despite Sue's blazing faith, what really triumphed was Peter Mann's instinct for a good story. It was the story that held them, and the real beauty of the pictures, and the acting and personal charm and sincerity of Sue Wilde.

All this, or something, held Sue herself. For it did catch her. She had thought she knew everything about the Nature film; whereas she knew everything about it but the Nature film. At first, naturally, her self-consciousness clung a little; then it fell away. She sat with an elbow on the arm of the seat, chin on hand, never once taking her eyes from the screen, hardly aware of the dense audience about her, no more than barely hearing the skilfully selected Russian music of the hidden, very competent orchestra.

There were two intermissions. During the first she tried to chat and failed. In the second, when the Worm suggested a turn in the open air she merely

shook her head, without looking up. And that hungry look deepened in the Worm's eyes.

Toward the end, when the buffeted but unbowed young woman was fighting with the strength of inspired despair for the one decent hope left to her, the hope of personal freedom, Peter's story reached its highest point. As did Sue's acting. The girl herself, sitting up there in the gallery, head bowed, shading with a slim hand her wet eyes, leaned more and more closely against the dear whimsical friend at her side. When his groping hand found hers she clung to it as honestly as the girl on the screen would have done.

It was over. For a moment the house was in darkness and silence. This was another of Zanin's effects. Then the lights came on dimly; the concealed orchestra struck softly into another of those Russian things; the primitive people on the stage, you suddenly saw, were quietly going on about the simple business of their village. A girl like Sue walked on, skilfully picked out by the lighting. The audience caught the suggestion and turned where they stood in seat-rows, aisles and entrances to applaud wildly. Still another Zaninesque touch!

CHAPTER XXXVI

APRIL! APRIL!

SLOWLY the crowd in the gallery moved out and down the twisting flights of stairs. Sue slipped her arm through the Worm's and silently clung to him. They were very close in spirit. Down at the street entrance, she said, "I don't want to see anybody, Henry." So he hurried her across the street through a lane in the after-theater traffic and around the corner into Seventh Avenue, heading south.

"We'll have a bite somewhere, Sue," said he then.

Her head inclined in assent.

"Somewhere up around here and not on Broadway. Where we won't see a soul." Her arm was still in his. She felt him draw a sudden deep breath. "Oh, Sue—if only I could take you down to the old rooms—make a cup of coffee—sit and look at you curled up in your own big chair—" He broke off.

Sue, still half in a dream, considered this.

"Why, I don't know, Henry—if you—"

His arm now pressed hers so tightly against his side that it hurt her a little.

"No!" he said in a low rough voice. "No!"

She was silent.

"Can't you see what's the matter, girl? I couldn't do it. I'd never let you go—never! I'm insane with love for you. I'm full of you—throbbing, singing, thrilling with you!"

Again he stopped short. They walked on slowly, arm in arm. She glanced up at his face. It was twisted, as with pain.

She tried to think. Every way lay confusion. Suddenly she freed her arm.

"Henry—" she began; then walked on a dozen steps before she could continue. "You have a time-table, Henry?"

"Oh—Sue!"

"Please, Henry! I can't miss that late train. I have no key, as it is. It will be difficult enough."

They walked another block, moving steadily toward the Pennsylvania-Station-Herald-Square region whence all roads lead out into Long Island and New Jersey. She did not know what he would say or do. It was a relief when finally he found the time-table in his pocket and handed it to her.

She stood under a street light to puzzle out the cabalistic tangle of fine print.

"What time is it now, Henry?"

He held out his watch for her to see.

"Yes, I can make it. I hate the tube, but there isn't time now for the ferry. Come as far as Herald Square with me, Henry."

There at the stairway under the elevated road she gripped his hand for an instant, then ran lightly down into the underground station. And not until the smoky local train, over in Jersey, was half-way out to the village that she now called home did it come to her that he had spoken not one word after the little episode of the time-table. She could see his face, too, with that look of pain on it.

She rang and rang at the door. Finally she knocked. Aunt Matilda came then, silent, grim, and let her in.

Her room was as she had left it when she rushed out in the afternoon. The dancing clothes lay on the bed. Rather feverishly she threw them on a chair. The Russian costume fell to the floor. She let it lie there.

She slept little; but, wide-eyed, all tight nerves, lay late. She heard them go off to Sunday-school, at quarter past nine. The children would be back

at eleven; but Mrs. Wilde and Aunt Matilda, if they followed their custom, would stay on to church. That is, unless Mrs. Wilde should have one of her nervous headaches. Sue hoped they would stay. It seemed to her that by noon she should be able to get herself in hand.

She lay a while longer. Then went down-stairs in her kimono and warmed up the coffee Aunt Matilda had left on the stove. She tried to eat a little bread, but had to give it up. She began to wonder, a thought frightened now, if she could get herself in hand by noon. Aunt Matilda's appearance, when she came in, had been forbidding. This morning no one had come near her, not even the children.

Slowly she mounted the stairs. Aimlessly she began dressing.

The Russian costume on the floor held her eye. She picked it up, fingered it. Then she put it on. One of the red boots was on the chair, the other under the bed. She found this and drew them both on. Next she got the gay cap from the closet.

She stood before the mirror. It seemed to her that her color was slowly returning. She slapped her cheeks to hasten it. Her thoughts were in a strange confusion. Just as she had been doing all night, she tried again to visualize her memories of

those hard busy days of working out the Nature film, tried to build out of what she could faintly, brokenly piece together the picture as she had now seen it, a complete created thing. But it was a jumble; it always went back to a bit of this experience and a bit of that. She tried to believe that the stirring, confident, splendid young creature on the screen was herself. . . . She pressed her palms against her temples. She could have cried out.

It was a relief to fall into one, then another of the old exercises preliminary to the dance. She went at these hard, until she could feel the warm blood tingling in her finger tips. Then she tried out that difficult Russian step. It did not come easily. There was effort in it. And her balance was not good. Then, too, the room was too small.

After a moment's hesitation she ran down-stairs, shut herself into the parlor, moved the furniture back against the walls, went methodically to work.

Outside, a little later, the human materials for a romantic comedy were swiftly converging on her. She did not know it. She did not once glance out the window. She heard nothing but the patter of her own light steps, the rustle of her silken costume, the clinking of the metals in the heels of the red boots that was meant to suggest the jingle of spurs.

She heard nothing but the patter of her own light step

Mrs. Wilde did have one of her headaches. She came home from Sunday-school with the children, leaving Aunt Matilda to uphold the good name of the household by remaining alone for church.

When the tall woman and the two little girls—the girls demure, the woman gloomy in her depth of sorrow—turned in at the front walk, a tall young man, in a baggy old gray suit, with a trick of throwing his right leg out and around as he walked and toeing in with the right foot, was rounding the corner, rushing along with great strides. His brow was knit, his manner distrait but determined.

The parlor door opened. Mrs. Wilde stood there, speechless. The girls crowded forward, incredulous, eager, their eyes alight. Becky jumped up and down and clapped her small hands. Mrs. Wilde suppressed her with a slap. The child began to whimper.

Sue stood in the middle of the room, flushed, excited, a glowing picture from a Bakst album.

Mrs. Wilde, bewildered, struggling for speech, gazed at the outraged furniture.

Sue, catching a new sound, stared past her at a lanky figure of a man who stood at the screen door. Then with a sudden little cry, she rushed out to him. He opened the door and stepped within. Her arms

flew around his neck. His arms held her close. He lifted her chin with a reverent hand, and kissed her lips. He did not know there was another person in the world.

Mrs. Wilde swept the children into a corner where they might not see.

"Sue," she cried. "Are you crazy? Have you no sense—no shame?"

Sue threw back her head, choked down a sound that might have been a laugh or a sob. Her eyes were radiant. "Thank God," she cried—"None!"

CHAPTER XXXVII

REENTER MARIA TONIFETTI

IT was the opening of Peter Ericson ("Eric") Mann's new play, *The Truffler,* at the Astoria Theater on Broadway where the signs never fail and where to have your name blazoned in electric lights above a theater entrance is to be advertised to a restless but numerically impressive world. Peter's name was up there now. It was, you might have supposed, his big night. But Peter was not among the eight or nine hundred correctly dressed men and women that pressed in expectantly through the wide doorway. Instead, clad in his every-day garments, an expression of ill-controlled irritation on his long face, moody dark eyes peering resentfully out through his large horn-rimmed glasses, he sat alone in the gallery, second row from the front, on the aisle.

Four rows behind him and a little off to the left, sat a good-looking young woman, an Italian girl apparently, who stared down at him in some agita-

tion. She, too, was alone. He had not seen her when he came in; he did not know that she was there.

The two seats in the front row across the aisle were vacant until just before the musicians climbed from the mysterious region beneath the stage into the orchestra pit down front and the asbestos curtain slid upward and out of sight. Then a rather casually dressed young couple came down the aisle and took them.

Peter, when he saw who they were, stiffened, bit his lip, turned away and partly hid his face with his program. The girl was Sue Wilde, the one person on earth who had the power of at once rousing and irritating him merely by appearing within his range of vision. Particularly when she appeared smiling, alert and alive with health and spirit, in the company of another man. When a girl has played with your deepest feelings, has actually engaged herself to marry you, only to slip out of your life without so much as consulting you, when she has forced you to take stern measures to bring her to her senses—only to turn up, after all, radiant, just where you have stolen to be alone with your otherwise turbulent emotions—well, it may easily be disturbing.

The other man, on this occasion, was the Worm.

Peter knew that the Worm, like Hy, had disapproved of the steps he had taken to waken the truffling Sue to a sense of duty, the steps he had been forced to take. It is not pleasant to be disapproved of by old companions; particularly when you were so clearly, scrupulously right in all you have done. Still more unpleasant is it when one of the disapprovers appears with the girl whose selfish irresponsibility caused all the trouble. Sue's evident happiness was the climax. It seemed to Peter that she might at least have the decency to look—well, chastened.

I spoke a moment back of other disturbances within Peter's highly temperamental breast. They had to do with the play. The featured actress, Grace Derring, also was potentially a disturber. If you have followed Peter's emotionally tortuous career, you will recall Grace. With his kisses warm on her lips, protesting her love for him, she had rewritten his play behind his back, tearing it to pieces, introducing new and quite false episodes, altering the very natures of his painstakingly wrought out characters, obliterating whatever of himself had, at the start, been in the piece. He had been forced to wash his hands of the whole thing. He had kept away from Neuerman and

Grace Derring all these painful months. He had answered neither Neuerman's business letters nor Grace's one or two guarded little notes. It had perturbed him to see his name used lavishly (Neuerman was a persistent and powerful advertiser) on the bill-boards and in the papers. It had perturbed him to-night to see it on the street in blazing light. And now it was on the program in his hand! . . . To be sure he had not taken steps to prevent this use of his name. He had explained to himself that Neuerman had the right under the contract and could hardly be restrained. But he was perturbed.

So here was the great night! Down there on the stage, in a few minutes now, Grace Derring, whose life had twisted so painfully close to his, would begin enacting the play she and Neuerman had rebuilt from his own inspired outburst. Up here in the gallery, across the aisle, one row down, sat at this moment, the girl who had unwittingly inspired him to write it. She was smiling happily now, that girl. She did not know that the original play—*The Truffler* as he had conceived and written it—was aimed straight at herself. It was nothing if not a picture of the irresponsible, selfish bachelor girl who by her insistence on "living her own life" wrecks the home of her parents. Peter's mouth set

rather grimly as he thought of this now. As he saw it, Sue had done just that. Suddenly—he was looking from behind his hand at her shapely head; her hair had grown to an almost manageable length—a warm thought fluttered to life in his heart. Perhaps it wasn't, even yet, too late! Perhaps enough of his original message had survived the machinations of Neuerman and Grace Derring to strike through and touch this girl's heart—sober her—make her think! It might even work out that . . . he had to set his teeth hard on the thoughts that came rushing now. It was as if a door had opened, letting loose the old forces, the old dreams (that is, the particular lot that had concerned his relations with Sue) that he had thought dead, long since, of inanition. . . . Confused with all these dreams and hopes, these resentments and indignations, was a thought that had been thrusting itself upon him of late as he followed Neuerman's publicity. It was that the play might succeed. However bad Grace had made it, it might succeed. This would mean money, a little fame, a thrilling sense of position and power.

Sue glanced around. Her elbow gently pressed that of the Worm. "It's Peter," she said low. "He doesn't see us."

The Worm glanced around now. They were both looking at Peter, rather eagerly, smiling. The eminent playwright gazed steadily off across the house.

"He looks all in," observed the Worm.

"Poor Peter"—this from Sue—"these first nights are a frightful strain."

"Pete!" the Worm called softly.

He had to see them now. He came across the aisle, shook hands, peered gloomily, self-consciously down at them.

"Hiding?" asked Sue, all smiles.

Peter's gloom deepened. "Oh, no," he replied.

"Evidently you're not figuring on taking the author's call," said the Worm, surveying Peter's business suit.

The playwright raised his hand, moved it lightly as if tossing away an inconsiderable thing.

"Why should I? I'm not interested. It's not my play."

The Worm was smiling. What was the matter with them—grinning like monkeys! Couldn't they at least show a decent respect for his feelings?

"There is a rather wide-spread notion to the contrary," said the Worm.

"Oh, yes"—again that gesture from Peter—"my name is on it. But it is not my play."

"Whose is it then?"

Peter shrugged. "How should I know? Haven't been near them for five months. They were all rewriting it then. They never grasped it. Neuerman, to this day, I'm sure, has no idea what it is about. Can't say I'm eager to view the remains."

The orchestra struck up. Peter dropped back into his seat. He raised his program again, and again watched Sue from behind it. He had managed to keep up a calm front, but at considerable cost to his already racked nervous system. Sue's smile, her fresh olive skin, her extraordinary green eyes, the subtly pleasing poise of her head on her perfect neck, touched again a certain group of associated emotions that had slumbered of late. Surely she had not forgotten—the few disturbed, thrilling days of their engagement—their first kiss, that had so surprised them both, up in his rooms. . . . She couldn't have forgotten! Perhaps his mutilated message *might* touch and stir her. Perhaps again . . .

Suddenly Peter's program fluttered to the aisle. He drew an envelope from one pocket, a pencil from another; stared a moment, openly, at her hair and the curve of her cheek; and wrote, furiously, a sonnet.

He crossed out, interlined, rephrased. It was a passionate enough little uprush of emotion, expressing very well what he felt on seeing again, after long absence, a woman he had loved—hearing her voice, looking at her hair and the shadows of it on her temple and cheek—remembering, suddenly, with a stab of pain, the old yearnings, torments and exaltations. Peter couldn't possibly have been so excited as he was to-night without writing something. His emotions had to come out.

The lights went down. The music was hushed. There was a moment of dim silence; then the curtain slowly rose. The sophisticated, sensation-hungry nine hundred settled back in their seats and dared the play to interest them.

I have always thought that there was a touch of pure genius in the job Grace Derring did with *The Truffler*. Particularly in her rewriting of the principal part. On the side of acting, it was unquestionably the best thing she had done—perhaps the best she will ever do. The situation was odd, at the start. Peter—writing, preaching, shouting at Sue—had let his personal irritation creep everywhere into the structure of the play. He was telling her what he thought she was—a truffler, a selfish girl, avoiding all of life's sober duties, interested only in

the pursuit of dainties, experimenting with pleasurable emotions. He had written with heat and force; the structure of the piece was effective enough. The difficulty (which Grace had been quick to divine) was that he had made an unsympathetic character of his girl. The practical difficulty, I mean. I am not sure that the girl as Peter originally drew her was not a really brilliant bit of characterization. But on the American stage, as in the American novel, you must choose, always, between artistic honesty and "sympathy." The part of commercial wisdom is to choose the latter. You may draw a harsh but noble character, a weak but likable character, you may picture cruelty and vice as a preliminary to Wesleyan conviction of sin and reformation; but never the unregenerate article. You may never be "unpleasant." All this, of course, Peter knew. The adroit manipulating of sympathy was the thing, really, he did best. But when he wrote *The Truffler* he was too excited over Sue and too irritated to write anything but his real thoughts. Therefore the play had more power, more of freshness and the surface sense of life, than anything else he had written up to that time. And therefore it was commercially impossible.

Now Grace Derring was a bachelor girl herself.

She knew the life. She had foregone the traditional duties—marriage, home-building, motherhood—in order to express her own life and gifts. She had loved—unwisely, too well—Peter. Like Peter, she approached the play in a state of nerves. As a practical player she knew that the girl would never win her audience unless grounds could be found for the audience to like her despite her Nietzschean philosophy. What she perhaps saw less clearly was that in her conception of the part she had to frame an answer to Peter's charges. Probably, almost certainly, she supposed the play something of a personal attack on her own life. Therefore she added her view of the girl to Peter's, and played her as a counter attack. If it had been real in the writing to Peter, it was quite as real in the playing to Grace. The result of this conflict of two aroused emotional natures was a brilliant theatrical success. Though I am not sure that the play, in its final form, meant anything. I am not sure. It was rather a baffling thing. But it stirred you, and, in the third act, made you cry. Everybody cried in the third act.

The curtain came slowly down on the first act. The lights came slowly up. A house that had been profoundly still, absorbed in the clean-cut present-

ment of apparently real people, stirred, rustled, got up, moved into the aisles, burst into talk that rapidly swelled into a low roar. The applause came a little late, almost as if it were an after-thought, and then ran wild. There were seven curtain calls.

Down-stairs, two critics—blasé young men, wandered out into the lobby.

"Derring's good," observed one. "This piece may land her solid on Broadway."

"First act's all right," replied the other casually, lighting a cigarette. "I didn't suppose Pete Mann could do it."

Up in the gallery, Sue, looking around, pressed suddenly close to the Worm, and whispered, "Henry—quick! Look at Peter!"

The playwright stood before his aisle seat, staring with wild eyes up at the half-draped plaster ladies on the proscenium arch. A line of persons in his row were pressing toward the aisle. A young woman, next to him, touched his arm and said, "Excuse me, please!" Sue and the Worm heard her but not Peter. He continued to stare—a tall conspicuous man, in black-rimmed glasses, a black ribbon hanging from them down his long face. His hand raised to his chest, clutched what appeared to be an envelope, folded the long way. Plainly he was beside himself.

The crowd in the aisle saw him now and stared. There was whispering. Some one laughed.

Again the young woman touched his arm.

He turned, saw that he was blocking the row, noted the eyes on him, became suddenly red, and stuffing the folded envelope into his pocket and seizing his hat, rapidly elbowed his way up the aisle.

Immediately following this incident attention was shifted to another. A good-looking young woman, apparently an Italian, who had been sitting four rows behind Peter and off to the left, was struggling, in some evident excitement, to get out and up the aisle. Her impetuosity made her as conspicuous as Peter had been.

Sue, still watching the crowd that had closed in behind the flying Peter, noted the fresh commotion.

"Quite an evening!" she said cheerfully. "Seems to be a lady playwright in our midst, as well."

The Worm regarded the new center of interest and grew thoughtful. He knew the girl. It was Maria Tonifetti, manicurist at the sanitary barber shop of Marius. He happened, too, to be aware that Peter knew Maria. He had seen Pete in there getting his nails done. Once, this past summer, he had observed them together on a Fifth Avenue bus. And on a Sunday evening he had met them

face to face at Coney Island, and Peter had gone red and hurried by. Now he watched Maria slipping swiftly up the aisle, where Peter had disappeared only a moment before. He did not tell Sue that he knew who she was.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

PETER STEALS A PLAY

PETER rushed like a wild man down the stairs to the street. He looked up street and down for a cruising taxi; saw one at the opposite curb; dodged across, behind automobiles and in front of a street-car. A traffic policeman shouted from the corner. Peter was unaware. He dove into the taxi, shouting as he did so, the address of the rooms in Washington Square. The taxi whirled away to the south. Peter, a blaze of nerves, watched the dial, taking silver coins from his pocket as the charge mounted. At his door, he plunged out to the walk, threw the money on the driver's seat, dashed into the old bachelor apartment building. The rooms had been lonely of late without Hy and the Worm. Now, his mind on the one great purpose, he forgot that these friends had ever lived. He ran from the elevator to the apartment door, key in hand, hurried within and tore into the closet. He emerged

with his evening clothes—the coat on the hanger, the trousers in the press—and his patent leather shoes. From a bureau drawer he produced white silk waistcoat (wrapped in tissue-paper) and dress shirt. A moment more and he was removing, hurriedly yet not without an eye for buttons and the crease in the trousers, his business suit. He did not forget to transfer the folded envelope to the inner pocket of his dress coat. But first he read the sonnet that was penciled on it; and reread it. It seemed to him astonishingly good. "That's the way," he reflected, during the process, standing before the mirror, of knotting his white tie,—"when your emotions are stirred to white heat, and an idea comes, write it down. No matter where you are, write it down. Then you've got it."

He looked thoughtfully at the long serious face that confronted him in the mirror, made longer by the ribbon that hung from his glasses. His hair was dark and thick, and it waved back from a high forehead. He straightened his shoulders, drew in his chin. That really distinguished young man, there in the mirror, was none other than Eric Mann, the playwright; author of the new Broadway success, *The Truffler,* a man of many gifts; a man, in short, of genius. Forgetting for the moment, his

hurry, he drew the folded envelope from his pocket and read the sonnet aloud, with feeling and with gestures. In the intervals of glancing at the measured lines, he studied the poet before him. The spectacle thrilled him. Just as he meant that the poem should thrill the errant Sue when he should read it to her. He determined now that she should not see it until he could get her alone and read it aloud. Once before during this strange year of ups and downs, he had read a thing of his to Sue and had thrilled her as he was now thrilling himself. Right here in these rooms. He had swept her off her feet, had kissed her. Well . . . He smiled exultingly at the genius in the mirror. Then he had been a discouraged young playwright, beaten down by failure. Now he was—or shortly would be—the sensation of Broadway, author of the enormously successful Nature film, and following up that triumph by picking to pieces the soul of the selfish "modern" bachelor girl—picking it to pieces so deftly, with such unerring theatrical instinct, that even the bachelor girl herself would have to join the throngs that would be crowding into the theater to see how supremely well he did it. More, was he not minting a new word, a needed word, to describe the creature. "The Truffler"—truffling—to truffle!

A grand word; it perfectly hit off the sort of thing. Within ten years it would be in the dictionaries; and he, Peter Ericson Mann, would have put it there. He must jog Neuerman up about this. To-morrow. Neuerman must see to it that the word did get into the language. No time to lose. A publicity job! . . . Come to think of it he didn't even know who was doing the publicity for Neuerman now. He must look into that. To-morrow. Shrewd, hard-hitting publicity work is everything. That's what lands you. Puts your name in among the household treasures. People take you for granted; assume your greatness without exactly knowing why you are great. Then you're entrenched. Then you're famous. No matter if you do bad work. They don't know the difference. You're famous, that's all there is to it. They have to take you, talk about you, buy your books, go to your plays. Mere merit hasn't a chance against you. You smash 'em every time . . . fame—money—power!

He saw the simply-clad Sue Wilde; short hair all massed shadows and shining high lights; olive skin with rose in it; the figure of a boy; all lightness, ease, grace; those stirring green eyes. . . .

He would read to her again. His sonnet! From

the heart—glowing with the fire that even in his triumph he could not forget.

She would listen!

The third was the "big act"; (there were four in all). All was ready for the artificial triumph that was to follow it—trained ushers, ticket sellers, door man, behind the last row of orchestra seats, clapping like mad. Experienced friends of the management in groups where they could do the most good. Trick curtains, each suggesting, by grouping or movement on the stage, the next. Neuerman wanted eight curtains after the big act. He got them—and five more. For the *claques* were overwhelmed. A sophisticated audience that had forgotten for once how to be cold-blooded, tears drying unheeded on grizzled cheeks, was on its feet, clapping, stamping, shouting. After the third curtain came the first shouts for "Author." The shouts grew into an insistent roar. Again and again the curtain rose on the shifting, carefully devised group effects; the audience had been stirred, and it wanted the man whose genius had stirred it.

Behind, in the prompt corner, there was some confusion. You couldn't tell that excited mob that Peter Mann hadn't written fifty lines of that cumula-

tively moving story. It was his play, by contract. The credit was his; and the money. But no one had seen him for months.

After the tenth call Neuerman ordered the footlights down and the house-lights up. He wore part of a wrinkled business suit; his collar was a rag; his waistcoat partly unbuttoned. He didn't know where he had thrown his coat. The sweat rolled in rivulets down his fat face.

Out front the roar grew louder. Neuerman ordered the house-lights down again and the footlights up.

"Here, Grace," he said, to Miss Derring who stood, in the shirt-waist and short skirt of the part, looking very girlish and utterly dazed—"for God's sake take the author's call."

She shook her head. "You take it," she replied. "I couldn't say a word—not if it was for my life!"

"Me take it!" He was mimicking her, from sheer nervousness. "*Me* take it? In these clothes?"

She laughed a little at this, absently. Flowers had come to her—great heaps of them. She snatched up an armful of long-stemmed roses; buried her face in them.

Neuerman waved the curtain up again; took her arm, made her go on. She bowed again, out there,

hugging her roses, an excited light in her eyes; and once more backed off.

"For God's sake, *say* something!" cried the manager.

She ignored this; bent over and looked through the heaps of flowers for a certain card. It was not there. She pouted—not like her rather experienced self but like the girl she was playing—and hugged the roses again.

For the twelfth time the curtain rose. Again she could only bow.

Neuerman mopped his forehead; then wrung out his handkerchief.

"Somebody say something," he cried. "Ardrey could do it." (Ardrey was the leading man.) "Where's Ardrey? Here you—call Mr. Ardrey! Quick!"

"I'll take the call," said a quiet voice at his elbow.

Neuerman gave the newcomer a look of intense relief.

Miss Derring caught her breath, reached for a scene-support to steady herself; murmured:

"Why—Peter!"

The curtain slid swiftly up. And Peter Ericson Mann, looking really distinguished in his evening clothes, with the big glasses and the heavy black rib-

bon, very grave, walked deliberately out front, faced the footlights and the indistinct sea of faces, and unsmiling, waited for the uproar that greeted him to die down. He waited—it was almost painful—until the house was still.

Up in the gallery, Sue Wilde, leaning forward, her chin propped on her two small fists, said:

"That beats anything I ever . . ." She ended with a slow smile.

The Worm was studying the erect dignified figure down there on the stage. "You've got to hand it to Pete," said he musingly. "He sensed it in the first act. He saw it was going to be a knock-out."

"And," said Sue, "he decided, after all, that it was his play. Henry, I'm not sure that he isn't the most irritating man on the earth."

"He's that, all right, Sue, child; but I'm not sure that he isn't a genius."

"I suppose they are like that," said Sue, thoughtful.

"Egotists, of course, looking at everything with a squint—all off balance! Take Pete's own heroes, Cellini, Wagner—"

"Hush!" she said, slipping her hand into his, twisting her slim fingers among his—"Listen!"

Peter began speaking. His voice was well placed.

You could hear every syllable. And he looked straight up at Sue. She noted this, and pressed closer to the man at her side.

"This is an unfashionable play (thus Peter). If you like it, I am of course deeply pleased. I did not write it to please you. It is a preachment. For some years I have quietly observed the modern young woman, the more or less self-supporting bachelor girl, the girl who places her independence, her capricious freedom, her 'rights,' above all those functions and duties to others on which woman's traditional quality, her finest quality, must rest. She is not interested in marriage, this bachelor girl, because she will surrender no item in her program of self-indulgence. She is not interested in motherhood, because that implies self-abnegation. She talks economic independence while profiting by her sex-attraction. She uses men by disturbing them, confusing them; and thus shrewdly makes her own way. She plays with life, producing nothing. She builds no home, she rears no young. She talks glibly the selfish philosophy of Nietzsche, of Artzibasheff. She bases her self-justifying faith on the hideous animalism of Freud. She asserts her right, as she says, to give love, not to sell it in what she

terms the property marriage. She speaks casually of 'the free relation' in love. She will not use the phrase 'free love'; but that, of course, is what she means.

"No nation can become better than the quality of its womanhood, of its motherhood. No nation without an ideal, a standard of nobility, can endure. We have come upon the days, these devastating days of war, when each nation is put to the test. Each nation must now exhibit its quality or die. This quality, in the last analysis, is capacity for sacrifice. It is endurance, and self-abnegation in the interest of all. It is surrender—the surrender to principle, order, duty, without which there can be no victory. The woman, like the man, who will not live for her country may yet be forced to die for her country.

"The educated young woman of to-day, the bachelor girl, the 'modern' girl, will speak loudly of her right to vote, her right to express herself,—that is her great phrase, 'self-expression'!—her intellectual superiority to marriage and motherhood. She will insist on what she calls freedom. For that she will even become militant. These phrases, and the not very pleasant life they cover, mean sterility, they

mean anarchism, they mean disorganization, and perhaps death. They are the doctrine of the truffler, the woman who turns from duty to a passionate pursuit of enjoyment. They are eating, those phrases, like foul bacteria, at the once sound heart of our national life.

"So you see, in presenting this little picture of a girl who thought freedom—for herself—was everything, and of the havoc she wrought in one perhaps representative home, I have not been trying to entertain you. I have been preaching at you. If, inadvertently, I have entertained you as well, so much the better. For then my little sermon will have a wider audience."

And, deliberately, he walked off stage.

On the stairs, moving slowly down from the gallery, Sue and the Worm looked at each other.

"I'm rather bewildered," said she.

"Yes. Nobody knew the play was about all that. But they believe him. Hear them yelling in there. He has put it over. Pete is a serious artist now. He admits it."

"There was rather a personal animus in the speech. Didn't you think so?"

"Oh, yes. He was talking straight at you. Back

last spring I gathered that he was writing the play at you—his original version of it."

From one landing to another Sue was silent. Then she said:

"I never knew such a contradictory man. Why, he wrote the Nature film. And that is all for freedom."

The Worm smiled. "Pete never had an idea in his life. He soaks up atmospheres and then, because he *is* a playwright and a dam' good one, he turns them into plays. He sees nothing but effects. Pete can't *think!* And then, of course, he sees the main chance. He never misses that. Why, that speech was pure genius. Gives 'em a chance to believe that the stuff they love because it's amusing and makes 'em blubber is really serious and important. Once you can make 'em believe that, you're made. Pete is made, right now. He's a whale of a success. He's going to be rich."

"But, Henry, they'll see through him."

"Not for a minute!"

"But—but"—she was laughing a little—"it's outrageous. Here are two successes—right here on Broadway—both by Peter—each a preachment and each flatly contradicting the other. Do you mean to say that somebody won't point it out?"

"What if somebody does? Who'd care? The public can't think either, you see. They're like Pete, all they can see is effects. And, of course, the main chance. They love his effectiveness. And they admire him for succeeding. I'm not sure, myself, that he isn't on the way to becoming what they call a great man."

CHAPTER XXXIX

A MOMENT OF MELODRAMA

THEY wandered into the crowded lobby. Friends were there from Greenwich Village. There was a high buzz of excitement. Jaded critics were smiling with pleasure; it was a relief, now and then, to be spared boredom. Peter had spared them.

Peter himself appeared, wearing his high hat—flushed, his eyes blazing, but unsmiling. He held a folded envelope against his shirt-front.

Acquaintances caught at him as he passed. One critic publicly congratulated him. It was an ovation; or it would have been had he responded. But he saw, out near the entrance, through the crowd, the face of Sue Wilde. He pressed through to her side.

"Sue," he murmured in her ear. "I want to see you? How about to-morrow? Lunch with me perhaps? I've written something . . ."

His excited eyes wandered down to the paper in his hand.

Sue, smiling a little, suddenly rather excited herself, pulled at the Worm's elbow. That young man turned.

"It seems to be across, Pete," he said casually.

Peter glared at him.

But the words he might have uttered, by way of putting this too casual old friend in his place, remained unsaid. For Sue, demure of everything excepting eyes, remarked:

"My husband, Peter. We were married to-day."

The playwright dropped, in one instant, from the pinnacle of fame, money power, on which, for nearly two hours, he had been exultingly poised. His chin sagged. His eyes were dazed. A white pinched expression came over his long face.

"Married—to-day!" He repeated the words in a flat voice.

She nodded. "You must congratulate us, Peter. We're dreadfully happy."

Peter seemed unable, however, to say anything more. He continued to stare. The beginnings of a low laugh of sheer delight bubbled upward within Sue's radiant being. Peter heard it, or felt it. Suddenly he bolted—out through the crowd to the sidewalk. He brushed aside the enthusiastic hands that would detain him. He disappeared.

There are conflicting reports as to what occurred after this. *The Evening Earth* described the incident as taking place on the sidewalk directly in front of the theater. *The Press-Record* had it on the farther corner, across the side street. *The Morning Bulletin* and *The Continental* agreed that the woman pursued him through the stage door.

Outside there, the traffic was heavy. Street-cars and motors filled the street from curb to curb. Women and their escorts were passing out of and into the famous restaurant that is next door but one to the Astoria. The sidewalk was crowded as always in the theater district on a fine September evening.

MacMerry, dramatic critic of *The Standard,* was the one closest to it. He had stepped outside to smoke his cigarette, found himself at the playwright's elbow, and spoke pleasantly to him of the play. He noted at the time, as he explained later at his club, that Mann was oblivious. He was very pale, stared straight ahead, and appeared to be drifting with the crowd.

The stage entrance to the Astoria is not around the corner, but is a narrow passage leading back from the street on the farther side of the restaurant. It was at this point, said MacMerry, that Mann

came to a stop. He seemed dazed. Which was not unnatural, considering the occasion.

As he stood there, a young woman rushed forward. She was of an Italian cast of countenance, not bad-looking, but evidently in a state of extreme excitement. Apparently she had been standing close to the building, watching the crowd. She had a knife in her hand.

This knife she wielded on the playwright. Three or four separate times she stabbed at his chest, evidently striking for the heart. Trying to seize her hand, Mann received a slight cut on the fingers. MacMerry himself finally caught her forearm, threw her back against the building, and took the knife away from her. By this time, of course, a dense crowd had pressed about them. And Mann, without a word, had slipped into the passage leading to the stage. Certainly, when the policeman got through to the critic's side, Mann was not there.

They talked it over in the lobby. There the Worm, catching an inkling of the catastrophe, took a hand. Learning from MacMerry that the girl was evidently an Italian, he put forth the theory that she had probably mistaken Pete for a man of her own blood. Peter was dark of hair and skin. Considering this, MacMerry recalled that Peter had given

no sign of knowing the woman. And he could not recall that she had spoken his name. He and the Worm then talked this over with the newspaper men that came rushing to the scene. The theory found its acceptors. The Worm pointed out that Peter was a man of quiet manners and of considerable dignity. He was never a roysterer. His ideas were serious. It was not likely that the woman had any claim upon him.

Perhaps the strongest influence working in Peter's interest was the fact that he was actually, at the moment, bursting into a big success. Every one, newspaper workers among the others, was glad to help him along. It was the thing to do. So by midnight all had agreed that it was a case of mistaken identity. Peter's luck held.

Meantime a little drama more real than any Peter had yet been credited with writing was taking place behind the scenes.

Act four was short; and from curtain to curtain Miss Derring held the stage. Therefore she had no knowledge of what was taking place in her dressing-room. Whether Peter came back with any coherent intention of finding Grace, I can not say. It is not likely. The most intensely exciting evening of his life had reached its climax in a short scene

in which a young woman had stabbed him. Immediately preceding this event, he had encountered the astounding fact that the girl it seemed to him he had always loved more than any one else in the world was married—married to his old chum.

As he ran through the dark passage from the street to the stage door, his hand still clutched the paper on which he had written the sonnet that was to touch her heart. You are to remember that this bit of verse had considerable emotional quality and more than a touch of grace. He had written it on an old envelope, seated in a crowded theater; but then, Schubert wrote wonderful songs on restaurant menus. It is so that things are done in the world of temperament. . . . I don't believe he knew what he was doing, then or later; perhaps, until the next morning. If Peter ever knew what he was doing!

The curtain was already up when he slipped sidewise past the doorman, through the vestibule, on to the stage. It was dim and still back there. Far away, beyond the great shadowy cluster of canvas and wood structures that made up the fourth act set, he could hear Grace's voice. Down front, by the prompt corner stood a silent little group—four

or five actors, the electrician, the mighty Max Neuerman in his shirt-sleeves.

Scene flats, six deep, were propped against the wall. He had to pick his way between piled-up properties and furniture. Two stage hands moved aside and let him by. He was conscious of feeling weak. His head was a maelstrom of whirling emotions. He was frightened. He couldn't get his breath. It wouldn't do to stay around here—perhaps make a scene and spoil his own play. He had no means of knowing for certain that Maria had not escaped MacMerry and pursued him up the passage. What if she should overpower the doorman—a superannuated actor—and get at him again! Even if she shouldn't, he might faint, or die. It was curiously hard to breathe.

He felt his way past more scenery, more properties. There was a doorway in the concrete stage wall, leading to dressing-rooms on a corridor, and more dressing-rooms up a twisting iron stairway.

Grace would have the star's room, of course. She wasn't a star yet, but Neuerman was featuring her name in all the advertising. That would naturally entitle her to the star's room. That would be the end room with the outside light. The door was ajar. It

was a large room. Yes, he could see her first act frock, over a chair. And Minna, the maid who had been with her when—when he and she had been on rather good terms, very good terms—was sitting quietly by the dresser, sewing. Minna was a discreet little person. She had carried notes and things. Still, it was awkward. He would prefer not having Minna see him just now. . . . He *was* weak. He found it necessary to catch at the iron stair rail and steady himself . . . Grace, you had to admit, was a good deal of a girl. It was rather remarkable, considering her hard life, the work, the travel, the—well, the one or two experiences—how fresh she looked, how young, how full of magnetic charm. Why, Grace was twenty-eight if she was a day! But she was putting the play over in great style. You had to admire her for that. It was too bad, thinking it all over, that their relations hadn't gone quietly along on a friendly basis, that emotions should have torn her so, intensifying her demands on him, making it really necessary for him to break off with her.

He plunged into the dressing-room.

CHAPTER XL

HIS UNCONQUERABLE SOUL

THE maid, Minna, sprang up, dropping her sewing and giving a throaty little shriek.

Peter, steadying himself with an effort, softly closed the door, leaned back against it, and frowned.

"Good God!" he said, "don't scream like that! They'll hear you clear to Fiftieth Street."

The girl had staggered back against the wall, was supporting herself there with outspread hands.

"Mr. Mann—you frightened me! And—and—"

Her eyes wandered from his white face to his shirt-front. That had been white. It was now spotted red with blood.

He stared down at it, fascinated.

"Please, Mr. Mann, will you lie down?"

She hurried to clear a heap of garments off the sofa: then she took his arm and steadied him as he walked across the room.

"You won't let me call a doctor, Mr. Mann?"

"Oh, no! Don't call anybody! Keep your head shut."

"But—but—"

"Here, help me with these studs."

"You'd better take your coat off first, sir."

She helped him get it off; unbuttoned his waistcoat; untied his white bow. He had to unbutton the collar himself, holding all the while to his folded envelope.

"It's astonishing how weak I am—"

"Oh, Mr. Mann, you're bleeding to death!" The girl began weeping.

"I'm not bleeding to death! That's nonsense! Don't you talk like that to me—keep your head shut! It's nothing at all. I'll be all right. Just a few minutes."

"Oh, Mr. Mann—"

Peter glanced nervously toward the door. "Shut up!" he whispered huskily.

She got the studs out of his shirt, and opened it. Beneath, his singlet was dripping red. She drew in a spasmodic long breath, with a whistling sound.

"Now, for God's sake, don't you go and faint!" said he. "I tell you it's nothing—nothing at all."

She was crying now.

"Quit your blubbering! Quit it! . . . Here" —he reached painfully into his pocket, produced a bank note—"run over to the drug store—there's one

just across, on the corner—and get some things—bandages, cotton, something to wash it off with. And hurry! I've got to be out of here in ten minutes."

"You won't let me call a doctor, Mr. Mann?"

"Call nothing! You do as I tell you. Understand!"

She took the money and slipped out, carefully closing the door after her.

Peter, flat on the sofa, peered about him. He wished the room were less brightly lighted. And it was disagreeably full of flowers. The air was heavy with the scent of them—like a funeral. Doubtless it would have been the decent thing for him to have sent Grace a few roses. If only for old times' sake. The window shade was swaying in the soft September breeze—what if Maria should be out there in the alley, peeping in? The sweat burst out on his forehead. *Had* they held her? God—if they hadn't.

His gaze drooped to the painful spectacle of his own person. He was a sight. There was blood all over his hands now, and on his clothes. The paper he gripped was stained with it. It had got on the sofa. It was on the floor. The door-knob, the door itself, the wall beside it, were marked with it.

What if Grace should come in! What could he

say? Could he say anything? His mind darted about this way and that, like a rat in a trap. This was awful! Where was that girl? Why, in Heaven's name, didn't she come back? It seemed to him that hours were passing. He observed that the blood came faster when he moved, and he lay very still. . . . Hours—hours—hours!

There were sounds outside. Some one ran up the iron stairs. Then some one else. People were speaking. The act—the play—was over.

He raised himself on his elbow. There was another step in the corridor, a step he knew. He let himself slowly down.

The door swung open. Grace, tired, a far-away look in her eyes, was coming slowly in. Then she fairly sprang in—and closed the door sharply. She was across the room before he could collect his thoughts and on her knees, her arms about him.

"Peter!"

"Look out, Grace. You'll get all covered with this stuff."

Her eyes, wide, horror-struck, were fastened on his. "Peter—how awful! What is it? What has happened?"

Her solicitude was unexpectedly soothing. His

self-respect came creeping back, a thought shamefaced. He even smiled faintly.

"I don't know, Grace, dear. Something happened —out in the street. A fight, I think. I was walking by. Then I was stabbed."

"Oh—oh!" she moaned, "some dreadful mistake!"

"Isn't it silly!"

"I'll have Neuerman get Doctor Brimmer."

"No—please—"

But she rushed out. In a moment she was back, with an armful of parcels. "Poor Minna—"

"I sent her to the drug store."

"Yes. She fainted. She was bringing these things. They've carried her into Miss Dunson's room."

She opened the parcels.

He watched her. He had forgotten that she was so pretty, that she had so much personality even off-stage. The turbulence in his heart seemed all at once to be dying down. A little glow was setting up there now. The little glow was growing. There was, after all, a great deal between him and Grace. He had treated her shabbily, of course. He hadn't known how to avoid that. She was a dear to be so

sweet about it. . . . The way she had rushed to him, the feel of her firm smooth hand on his cheek, the fact that she had, right now, in the very moment of her triumph, forgotten herself utterly—that was rather wonderful. A fine girl, Grace!

She came to him again; opened his singlet and examined the wounds.

"I don't think they're very deep," said she. "What a strange experience."

"They're nothing," said he.

"Perhaps I'd better not do anything until the doctor comes."

"Of course not," said he.

She was bending close over him. A loose strand of her fine hair brushed his cheek. A new fever was at work within him. He kissed her hair. She heard the sound but said nothing; she was washing away the blood with the antiseptic solution Minna had got. He caught one glimpse of her eyes; they were wet with tears.

Suddenly he knew that the sonnet, on the envelope, blood-soaked, was burning in his hand. He raised it.

"Careful, dear!" she murmured. "Don't move."

"We've quarreled, Grace—"

"Yes, I know."

"I haven't been—decent, even—"

She was silent.

"But when I saw you to-night—" He unfolded the envelope. "I wrote this to-night. Up in the gallery . . ."

Slowly, in a low voice that trembled with passion, he read it to her. And he saw the tears crowd out and slowly fall. He had his effect.

"Grace, dear—"

"Yes, Peter."

"I'm tired of being alone—tired."

"I know . . ."

"Why shouldn't we try the real thing—go all the way—"

"You mean—marriage, Peter?"

"I mean marriage, Grace."

Very tired, very thoughtful, still in the costume and make-up of the part, kneeling there beside him, she considered this. Finally she lifted her eyes to his. "I'm willing, Peter," she said. "I won't try to deceive myself. It is what I have wanted."

The doctor came then; bandaged him, and advised quiet for a few days, preferably in a hospital. When he had gone, she cried with a half smile: "You're not going to his old hospital, Peter. You're coming home with me."

He lay there in a beatific dream while she changed to her street clothes.

They were ready to go. She had ordered an ambulance, and they were waiting. There was a knock.

"Come in," she called.

The door opened. First to appear was a breezy young man who could not possibly have been other than a press-agent—a very happy press-agent. Next came a policeman; a mounted policeman, evidently, from his natty white cap and his puttees. Following were half a dozen newspaper men.

"Sorry to disturb you, Mr. Mann," said the press-agent, "but they're holding the woman, and the officer wants to know if you're going to prefer charges."

"I'm not going to prefer charges against anybody," said Peter with quiet dignity. And then added: "What woman?"

The policeman looked straight at him. "The young woman that stabbed you," he said.

Peter made a weak gesture. His dignity was impenetrable.

"I really don't know yet what it was," he said. "It happened so quickly."

The press-agent gave the officer a triumphant look, as if to say: "There, you see!"

"Do you think you could identify her?" This from the officer.

"No," said Peter. "I'm afraid I couldn't. My thoughts were anywhere but there."

They went away then. The reporters hung eagerly on the sill; but the press-agent hustled them out.

Grace, subdued, thinking hard, took her hat from the wall rack. A woman had stabbed him. Grace knew, none better, that her Peter was an extremely subtle and plausible young man.

But she had wanted him. She had got him. And she let it go at that. In the ambulance, all the way to her rooms, her arm was under his head, her smile was instant when his roving gaze sought her face. It seemed to her that he was grateful, that he wanted her there. This was something. And the poor boy was suffering!

Once he spoke. He was very weak. And there was noise in the street. She had to bend close to hear him.

"What is it, dear?"

"That press-agent—I should have talked with him—something very important. . . ."

Sue and her new husband rode down to Wash-

ington Square on the bus, and wandered over into Greenwich Village. It was midnight. There were few signs of life along the twisted streets and about the little triangular parks. But Jim's was open.

They had Welsh rabbits and coffee. The Worm lighted his caked old brier pipe.

"Been thinking over Pete's speech, Susan," said he.

"Of course. So have I."

"As I recall it, the gist of it"— the Worm's lean face bore the quizzically thoughtful expression that she loved to see there; she watched it now—"Pete uses the word 'truffler' to mean a young woman who turns from duty to the pursuit of enjoyment. Those were pretty nearly his words, weren't they?"

"Almost exactly."

"The Truffler, according to Pete, builds no home, rears no young, produces nothing. She goes in for self-expression instead of self-abnegation. She is out for herself, hunting the truffles, the delicate bits, playing with love and with life. That's about it?"

"Just about, Henry."

"Well, in applying it only to women, Pete was arbitrary. For he was not defining a feminine quality —he was defining a human quality, surely more commonly found among members of his own sex.

No"—he clamped his lips around his pipe stem, puffed and grinned—"no, Pete has done a funny thing, a very funny thing. The exasperating part of it is that he will never know. Do you get me?"

"Not exactly."

"Why—Pete's the original George W. Dogberry. He has described himself. That little analysis is a picture of his own life these past years. Could anything illustrate it more perfectly than the way he stole that play to-night? Self-interest? Self-expression? That's Pete. Hunting the delicate bits?" He checked himself; he had not told Sue about Maria Tonifetti. He didn't propose to tell her. "When has *he* built a home? When has *he* reared any young? When has *he* failed to assert his Nietzschean ego? When has *he* failed to yield to the Freudian wish? Who, I wonder, has free-loved more widely. Why, not Hy Lowe himself. And poor Hy is a chastened soul now. Betty's got him smothered, going to marry him after the divorce —if he has a job then. Waters Coryell told me. . . . No"—he removed his pipe and blew a meditative ring of smoke—"no, dear little girl, whatever the pestiferous Pete may think, or think he thinks, you are not the Truffler. Not you! No, the Truffler is Peter Ericson Mann."

They wandered home at one o'clock—home to the dingy little apartment on Tenth Street that had been her rooms and later his rooms. It was their rooms now. And the old quarters were not dingy, or bare or wanting in outlook, to the two young persons who let themselves in and stood silently, breathlessly there, she pressing close to his side; they were a golden palace, brushed by wings of light.

"Henry," she whispered, her arms about his neck, her wet face on his breast, her heart beating tumultuously against his—"Henry, I want us to build a home, to—to produce . . ."

With awe and a prayer in his heart, he kissed her.

THE END